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FANTASY FICTION



HE SHUTTLES . . . by Theodore Sturgeon

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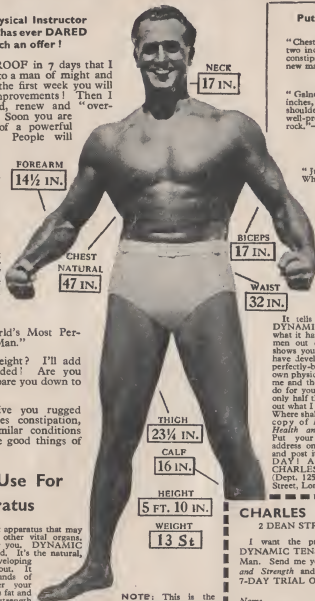
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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

HE SHUTTLES

By THEODORE STURGEON

A very logical—and very unpleasant—little story based on the old fairy tale. He had three wishes. He was very clever. He would escape all penalties—

"Why are you sitting here alone in this little room?" asked the man.

"I am not alone any more, because you have come," I told him. He had not been there an hour ago, or a minute ago either, but I was not surprised. That was because it was this man, and no other.

"Why are you sitting here, looking at a white sheet of paper in your typewriter, pulling your ear with one hand and that fuzzy hair with the other?" he asked.

"I am doing it because I am a person who writes stories for other people to read," I said. "But I am not writing now because I can't think of anything to write about. That makes me unhappy and so I pull my ear and my hair. It isn't fuzzy."

"It is fuzzy." The man looked at me for a little while. "Are the stories you write true?"

"No," I said. "I have never written a story that was true. People don't like to read things that are true. They only like things that might be true. One must be very clever to write a story that is true and make it seem as if it might be true. I am not very clever, so I must rely on my imagination."

"Oh," he said, as if he understood me, which was surprising because I'm sure I didn't know what I was talking about.

"I will tell you a story," he said. "But it is a true story, and must be believed. If I tell you the story, will you believe it?"

"If it is a good story, I don't care whether it is true or not," I said. "If credence is the price I must pay, I pay it gladly." I set my margin, lit a cigarette and looked at him.

He said again, "The story is true." And he began to speak. This is what he said:

I WAS going about the world doing my duty, when my attention was called to a man named MacIlhainy Tobin, whose conceit was phenomenal. It was unfortunate and incurable, because it was

quite justified. He was indeed a superior person. He did not need my help, because his wits were so very sharp; but when I offered it he took advantage of it, for he was one of those who never miss an opportunity for gain. I did not offer him gain, but neither had those of whom he had taken advantage in the past. He felt that he could twist whatever circumstance crossed his path into something of value for him. And in this instance he was misled purely because he had no precedent to follow that involved failure.

He was alone in his great study, thinking of the things he had done and been which proved his superiority. "I am a man," he said, "who has never made a mistake."

"That is not true," I said to him. "Perfection is an unnatural thing, and against laws that cannot be broken. You exist, and you are perfect. That is your mistake."

He looked over his plainlike desk at me.

"I have never seen you before, sir," he said cordially. "I did not see you come into my room or sit opposite me, but I am not startled. You are welcome."

"Thank you," I said. "I startle nobody. You are proud of yourself?"

"Yes," he said, and smiled. He was a magnificent man, with a great square jaw and large gray eyes. His hair was like burnished platinum, and the lamp-light delighted in leaping from it. "I have everything I want, including the desire for things which I may not have. I am complete, and in flux, and therefore greatly contented with myself."

"You have been ruthless," I said.

He smiled and spread his hands. "I have been logical."

"You have paid the penalties for all you have done?"

"Yes. One must. That, too, is logical."

"Are you proud of that, then?"

No one may be angry toward me, but if it had been possible, he would have been furious. "That is my one shame," he said softly. "That in the



reasonable course of events, even such as I must bow to circumstance. I regret that there are powers beyond my control. My ego is as well-ordered and methodical as it can possibly be, and yet I am forced to turn aside from the creations of fools whose stupidity has led them to believe that their lives are for purposes which cannot benefit me."

"You are ashamed of being human, then. No human can achieve divinity and stay human—without my help."

He raised his silver eyebrows. "What is divinity?"

"Complete satisfaction. I ask you, then: Granting that, what is divinity?"

He stared at his hands. "For me, it would be . . . it would be power. Complete control over all the Universe. If I could receive the homage from all

things, past present and future, living and unliving and dead, that I get now from my own ego, then I would be completely satisfied."

"Do you want that, then?"

He was silent for a long while, thinking. "No!" he said suddenly. It would be *ne plus ultra*. Could I not fight fools, I could no longer be contented with myself, for my successes. I have more powers now than those you offer me; for if everything were possible to me, I would lose all urges. That loss I cannot afford. What powers have you?"

"I have none," I told him, "except the ability to give powers these must be of your choice."

"Wishes, then?"

I nodded. "Three wishes—and they will be true to the letter."

"I have heard of the things you have done," he said. "You are a legend in many lands. Why have you invariably given three wishes to fools?"

"I have never met any others."

He laughed uproariously. "Even for such as you," he said, wiping his eyes, "there must be new experiences. You are about to have one. You will grant me three wishes, and find out that I am not a fool. You may even find out a thing or two about yourself."

"I am not a personality, but an instrument," I told MacIlhainy Tobin. "I can no more find out anything about myself than can that beautiful paper knife discover that it was stolen from the British Museum. I have my function and I perform it."

"What is your source, then? For whom do you do your work?"

"That is beyond my ability to question. Perhaps I, too, am a stolen instrument—and perhaps again I am that source. You are fumbling with the unknowable. It is not like you to fumble."

"*Touché*. Will you give me time to consider my wishes?"

"The wishes are yours, to use as you please, when you please. I will be ready when you are." I left him then. He sat for a long while looking at the empty chair across that great desk. Then he laughed and went to bed.

MacIlhainy Tobin was an extremely well-disciplined man. He did not let my visit interfere with his daily life. He ran his great corporations and held his conferences and played his excellent golf, just as usual. But all the while he thought. He thought of the power that was his for the asking, and the homage. Often he thought of himself, and of what a power he was in the world. Sometimes he thought of me, and wondered frankly if my coming was a reward, or a test or a punishment.

He spent long hours over his books, and he bought more and more books. He read legends and histories and fairy tales, and learned what others had done with my three wishes. Sometimes he laughed richly, and sometimes he frowned and bit his lip.

There were those who did not seem to be fools, and yet they were all made unhappy by the wishes, ultimately. They were returned, by their impulsiveness, to their original states, or they asked for things that were too great for them to handle, and went mad. There

were a few who were philosophic, and said that now they would be happy to cultivate their own gardens. There did not seem to be any malice in the fulfilment of my three wishes. Each was given exactly the things for which he asked. And yet, without exception, each had been hurt, usually quite terribly, by the power I had given.

When MacIlhainy Tobin thought of this, he would pull his lip and scowl. And he made up his mind to outwit me. That was hardly just, I thought; for it was his power, not mine. He would have to outwit himself, then, not me. It would be interesting to see if his wits were sharp enough for that task. No one had ever done it before. I bore him no malice, I think because I can bear none toward anyone.

It was two years before MacIlhainy Tobin was ready for me, and in that time he had formulated thousands of wishes, and rejected thousands. I knew he was ready because he had begun to suffer.

"May I talk with you before I state my wishes?" he asked me when he saw me again.

"Certainly."

"When you grant me a wish, is it a complete thing? For example, should I wish to be a bird, would I be a bird exactly like other birds, or would I differ?"

I smiled. "MacIlhainy Tobin, you are the first man who has ever asked me that question. No, you would differ, for there is that about you, and about all men, which is beyond us, you and I. There is a small part of you which is completely you, and yet different. It can observe, and feel, but only in terms of you as you are now. It has no will; it cannot control you or any part of you. It is something that you have built yourself, something that neither of us can touch or change or destroy. That, no matter what you wish to be, you must carry with you."

"I expected that. A soul, eh?"

"I don't know. I know nothing of that. I can grant your wishes. If one of them is that you know—"

He shook his head. "I'd rather not."

"You are indeed an amazing man, MacIlhainy Tobin."

"Yes. Tell me, may I postpone one, or two, or all, of these wishes?"

"Of course: they belong to you."

And may I have them consecutively, the fulfilment of the second to begin after the completion of the first?"

"Yes." A cautious man, this.

He sat silent for a moment, his eyes glittering. "How can a man avoid paying the penalties for his acts?" he asked me suddenly.

"By dying—"

"Ah," he said. "Very well, I am ready to state my wishes."

I waited.

"First, from the time I wake tomorrow morning until the time I go to sleep tomorrow night, I want complete obedience from my fellow men, complete dominance of my will over theirs."

"Granted."

"Second, I want complete freedom from penalties of any and all kinds for my acts during that time."

"You are indeed an extraordinary man, MacIlhainy Tobin. You want death, then?"

"By no means," he chuckled. "You see, tomorrow I shall be careful to do something that carries a penalty of death." He laughed softly.

"You consider that a master stroke. You have exhausted only two wishes, and yet have what others would have required dozens to cover. You may have riches, authority, worship, invulnerability, revenge—anything you desire. Remarkable. Why do you limit yourself to one day?"

"Because I can plan one day. To plan more than that in minute detail would leave me open to a possible shift in circumstances. With what I can do in one day, I'll have all I can ever want, in every way."

"But suppose you live only a week or two after tomorrow; have you thought of that?"

"Yes. Is my second wish granted?"

"Granted. The third?"

"Postponement of the third."

"Ah—you wish to be deprived of the power to make that third wish? Until when?"

"Until I begin the day after tomorrow."

"Perfect. If you find it advantageous to return to your present state, or to continue your powers, or your life indefinitely, you will be able to. May I congratulate you?"

The slight inclination of his massive head was acceptance. "May I ask one more question?"

"Of course."

"I know that I shall be free of penalties tomorrow. But how will this be done?"

"If you do something to include

death as one of your penalties, then your freedom must be arranged in the only other way possible."

"And that is—"

"I do not know. All I can do is give you your wishes."

"Very well. Good-by," MacIlhainy Tobin said to the empty room.

Tobin awoke vastly refreshed. It had been a pleasant evening, he thought, and he rather admired himself for sleeping so well after it. Today, then, was his day.

Landis was stepping softly about, opening the drapes to the early morning sun. He picked up a tray and brought it to Tobin's huge bed.

"Six o'clock, sir." Landis stood and moved as if the ramrod up his back were woven of barbed wire. The only detectable line of demarcation between his chin and his neck was his faultless little tie, all of which by no means detracted from his excellence as a butler-valet.

"Ah—Landis. Good." Tobin watched the man's deft hands blend three coffees in the silver-bound eggshell cup. "Has Synthetic Rubber moved?"

"According to the wire service, sir, it will advance one and seven-eighths at opening this morning. Mr. Krill, of Schambers Brokerage, gave the wrong information."

"Splendid. I shall deal with Mr. Krill." Tobin brooked no interference on the part of any of the string of brokers who were forced to report all overnight orders to him. "Anything else?"

"The German army opened a new offensive during the night. Three more ships have been sunk. The president has suggested, off the record, another special session of Congress in Tokyo—"

"Never mind all that. Today I shall be occupied with more personal matters. How's the Groot situation?"

"Mr. Groot was found dead an hour ago, sir. Suicide."

Tobin clucked happily. "What a pity. I shall have to take over his holdings. Anything else?"

"That is all, sir."

"Er—Landis—you hate my guts, don't you?"

The butler recoiled. "Why, sir—"

"Tell the truth." Tobin's voice was very soft.

"I do. You're the most cold-blooded scoundrel in creation. I've met many sharks since I have worked for you, but you're the granddaddy of them all."

Tobin laughed easily. "That will do, Landis. You will forget this incident. Is my bath ready?"

"Your bath is ready, sir," said Landis, as if no one had previously mentioned a bath.

"Good. Get out of here."

"Very good, sir."

Tobin lay back on the pillow and chuckled. It worked then. Had he not the power to demand the truth and get it, Landis could never have brought himself to such an admission. Nor could he have forgotten it that way. He would have taken his dignity and his morning coat away forever; Tobin knew him. Still smiling, he went and luxuriated in his tub.

He chose a soft gray suit of radical cut—he could wear those seamless shoulders and still look broad and powerful. A light gray shirt. And as he remembered that he had some murdering to do today, he chose a deep purple tie, which somehow suited the occasion—crepe soles, of course; they would come in handy, Homburg, the stained bamboo cane; a ring to match his tie; ah, splendid.

"The town car, sir?" asked Landis. "I'll walk." He strode out of the house, leaving his butler shocked and shaken at such a radical departure from habit. He must remember to have Landis recall his pretty speech of the morning; the fool would probably drop dead.

He walked to the corner and stood there waiting for the light to change, enjoying the morning air. A round-shouldered youth touched his arm.

"Mister, you look like Wall Street to me—"

Tobin regarded him frigidly.

"As a fellow investor, I want to tell you that Bowery Flophouse is up five points, McGinnis' hash joint is up two blocks, an' I'm up a tree. Situation shaky. How's about a double dimes? You won't feel it, an' it'll make me feel richer'n you look."

Tobin laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "As I live and breathe, a panhandler with originality!" He looked the threadbare creature over curiously. Might as well get it over with; this trash would be as good as any. "You can do something for me."

"Sure, boss. Sure. Name it an' it's yours."

Tobin knew that. "Look! See that big tractor-trailer job that just pulled up for the light? Get underneath it;

lie down with your chest up against a tire. Go ahead; now."

The youth's eyes glazed a little, and he went off to do what he was told. Tobin walked on casually, glad to have the killing off his mind. "His life for mine; it's rather a pity. I might have found someone more worthy."

A shrill scream behind him did nothing to his steady pace. Horror and shame were penalties—and today he paid none.

Curiosity, though, did what shame could not. It would be a confounded nuisance if the boy bungled the job. He stopped and turned. The crowd he expected was milling around the truck; and then he saw a policeman, supporting the reeling panhandler. The boy was fighting to go back to the truck; strong hands kept him away. Of course! Some idiot had seen him, pulled him out in time. Rage surged through Tobin; rage, and hatred of anyone foolish enough to interfere with MacIlhainy Tobin. He snapped himself into line quickly, though. He had all day. He turned and went again toward his offices.

"Good heavens!" I said, letting my fingers slip off the keys. "Must you go about the world making it possible for people to do that sort of thing?"

"Must you write stories?" asked the man.

"Well—to keep on living. But you—"

"Just," he nodded, "to remain extant."

"But what's the differ— Oh, I—see. Will you have some wine?"

"Thank you."

He extended a small crystal cup and it touched my arm and was full. There was a . . . a pale spot on my arm—

"Please go on," I said.

"Sykes!" Tobin boomed as he strode into his office suite.

"Yes, sir."

Sykes would be a little annoying, Tobin realized, for he would be precisely the same under stress of Tobin's new and absolute command as he was at any other time.

"Get in touch with every available holder of a seat in the Stock Exchange. Have them all here at ten o'clock. Miss Twigg! Have papers drawn up for each of the men that Sykes brings in, signing over to me complete ownership of ninety percent of their properties, holdings, and interests, corporative or private. Miss Allen, I want Krill here immediately. Farrell Sykes, where the

devil is Farrel? Three minutes late? When he comes in, fire him. After seven years with me he should know better. Miss Betteredge, read my mail, except the personals. Miss Willis, read the personals. Philip, drop the profits on 227, 89, and 812, and put them all in Synthetic Rubber. It's good for two points today. I'm riding it. Give it a number. Sykes! Damn it, where's—Oh. I don't want to see anyone but Krill. If Thurston and Greenblatt phone, tell them no. Farrel! Where—That's right, Sykes. Thanks. Promote Goober, but give him ten dollars a week less than Farrel was getting. Get out of the way." And, smoothly as ever, the day was begun.

Once in his office, Tobin shrugged out of his coat and threw off his hat. Both were caught expertly before they reached the nub-piled carpet, by the omnipresent Sykes. "Anything else, sir?"

"Yes. Go to hell. Wait a minute! Don't take me so seriously, man! Get busy on those property transfers. You're about to be working for the richest man in creation. *Move, now!*"

The communicator gave its discreet whisper.

"Well?"

"There are seven hundred and twelve members of the Stock Exchange on the way to the auditorium. The rest are either unavailable or refuse to come unless they have more information."

"Refuse? Refuse? Tell them that if they don't get here immediately the whole financial world is going to smash—really smash, this time. Tell them I will give all the details when they get here. That'll scare them. They know me."

"Yes, Mr. Tobin. Mr. Krill is waiting."

"Krill, eh? Send him right in."

The broker was a slender man with a wide forehead and a little pointed chin. He was pale—his face, his eyes, his hands. He came straight across the room and put his hands on Tobin's desk.

"All right, Tobin. I can take it. You have too many noses scattered around. I knew you'd smell me out."

"Why did you quote the wrong price on Synthetic, then?"

"I'd tell you, and it would make some difference to you if you were human."

"Unfortunately, Krill, I'm not particularly human today," Tobin said, and smiled. "Tell me, anyway."

"I've had my eye on Synthetic Rubber for quite a while. I didn't know you controlled it, or I wouldn't have touched it. I got a tip and put every cent of capital of the United Charities into it. Dozens of organisations whose business is caring for poor, sick and old people. I've done wonders for United in the time I've handled their investments. I didn't think your man would be interested in the stock, or the fact that I would jump it. I thought I could get out with a decent profit this morning before you were interested. I quoted a lower price on it on the slim chance that you'd have the information from no one else. I lost. If I try to sell now, I'll be delayed until you dump; I know that. And you can afford to keep the price down until I must let those shares go. What are you going to do?"

"You had no business giving me false information." Tobin flicked a switch.

"Yes, sir?" said the communicator.

"Dump Synthetic."

"Yes, sir."

Krill stood quite still. "Eighty thousand people—sick people, Tobin, and kids—are going to suffer because you did that. My mistake for hoping."

"Are you going to kill yourself now, Krill?" Tobin asked conversationally.

"Wh—"

"Tell me!"

"What else can I do?"

"Krill, there's something I tried to do this morning that didn't work out. I'll have to try again. It might as well be you. Never let it be said I wouldn't help out a man in a jam. Krill, I don't want you cluttering up my office. Go out into the waiting room and die. Go on!"

Krill looked at him strangely and his lips writhed. He closed the door very gently behind him.

Tobin drew interlocking circles on his scratch pad for a few minutes. The communicator buzzed.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Tobin! Mr. Krill just collapsed in the waiting room!"

"Tsk, ts! Will he be all right?"

"He's—dead, Mr. Tobin."

He snapped off the instrument and laughed to himself. Ah, well. He was not the first man who had cheated death by giving the old fellow another customer.

"Sykes!"

The secretary popped up like a neat little jack-in-the-box.

"Mr. Tobin. I . . . I couldn't help

hearing what you said to Mr. Krill. It . . . it's uncanny—" He mopped his rabbit-face. "You told him, and . . . and he— My goodness!"

This was annoying. "Sykes, you heard nothing, remember, nothing of this affair. Understand?"

Sykes said blankly: "You called me, Mr. Tobin?"

Tobin nodded, more to himself than to Sykes. "How many of the Exchange members are here?"

"Eleven hundred odd, sir. That's about all we can expect, I'm afraid. The rest are out of reach or willing to chance not coming."

"Hm-m-m. Get whoever is drawing up those property transfers and change 'ninety percent' to 'one hundred percent' on all those to be signed by holdouts. The fools— In the meantime, get all of them on the phone—a conference line. I'll talk to them all at once."

"Yes, sir."

"Then go down to the auditorium and tell those who have come to take it easy and keep quiet until I get there."

Left alone again, Tobin beamed upon himself. Things were going fine. He'd have everything finished by two this afternoon at this rate, and then he'd have the whole evening to himself. There ought to be a gr at many amusing things to do. The phone rang.

"Conference call, sir."

"How many are on the line?"

"Six hundred and twenty-four, sir."

"Good. That will be enough. Put 'em on."

The connection was made. "Hello— MacIlhainy Tobin, New York. I want each of you to give me absolute attention. Do not hang up.

"Each and every one of you will have drawn up a document signing over to me all your holdings, private possessions, interests and enterprises. Everything you own, in whole or in part. No loopholes; I want ironclad documents. I want them signed, witnessed, and in the mail before twenty-four hours from the present time. There is no need for me to persuade or threaten you; you will do as I say because you want to and because you must. You will let no one stop you, or change your documents in any way. Those of you who wish may apply for positions in my organization. Remuneration will be on a merit basis. That is all. Drop everything and attend to this immediately."

He hung up and signalled the switch-

board. "Put me on the annunciator in the auditorium."

Over the loud speaker Tobin repeated his message. More than a thousand men left quietly and went back to their offices and homes—to figure, to phone, to dispossess themselves.

"I'd no idea it would be as easy as that," Tobin muttered happily. "Let's see—there are about one hundred and thirty men who did not get my message. That means I have well over seventeen hundred seats in the Exchange. Enough, I think, to whittle down the objectors. Sykes!"

"Mr. Tobin?"

"We are about to be swamped with highly valuable mail. Double the office force and have a plan prepared for unifying the industries that have been signed over to me. Get it ready as soon as possible. Two weeks should be sufficient. Sykes, this firm is going places— See that those papers are delivered."

Well, that was that. Tobin had an organization strong enough to beat down any resistance, and had the best business minds obtainable working for him. He owned the financial structure of the United States and had a strangle hold on the world. That should be enough to keep him pleasantly occupied for the next ten thousand years or so. That third wish— Tomorrow he would wish for a lifetime that could be ended only by his own hand. That ought to do it. It still left him an out— He had time for a final decision on that, too. He must phrase it to exclude illness; he was not a young man any longer. Never mind; it could be slept on.

He called it a day at three o'clock and left Sykes to clean up the details.

Again MacIlhainy Tobin refused a car and left Sykes even more surprised than Landis had been. He wandered about casually, peering around, looking for something really amusing to do. A cafeteria seemed a good place; he went and had a cup of coffee. He hated cafeteria coffee, but today—everything was different. Even his sense of taste could not be penalized by the bellywash.

He spread a late paper out and turned the pages restlessly. A small item on an inside page caught his eye. "Rudolph Krill, broker—Tobin Building—heart failure—" Tobin chuckled. That wouldn't be on the inside pages tomorrow. Not when United Charities got wind of the facts. Quite a joke, that. Heart failure. Why, Krill—

The smile froze on his broad face.

Heart failure? Since when was that a punishable offense—for a second party? It was, of course, suicide. Krill had willed himself to death. But—that wasn't murder.

Tobin stood up and sent his cup crashing to the floor. He stalked past the startled cashier, who managed to enunciate: "Ch-check, please—"

"Be quiet!" Tobin said, without turning his head, and kept on moving. This wouldn't do at all. He had to murder someone, or pay the price of his freedom from punishment.

Whose idea was this death penalty for murder, anyway? Blessed civilization. Tobin snorted. If you killed a man cleverly enough to outwit society, there was no penalty. Society killed without penalty. Armies—Tobin was furious. He thought he had freed himself from the stupidity of mankind for good and all. And now, even with his superhuman power, he had to stoop to the level of man—knowtow to idiocy. He must murder someone so clumsily that it must be detected and traced to him, immediately. He walked a little faster. Time was short. He'd wasted hours—

Opportunity, from force of habit, presented itself to him. A busy street corner, a taxi cutting across traffic to make a turn, a man standing just off the curb—

Tobin pushed him. This was not like the morning. This time the tires were moving, and moving fast. This time they drew blood, chewed on bones and bits of cloth. In the split second of horror before the crowd began to chatter, Tobin saw that he had done it this time. The man was dead. You couldn't cut an angworm up that way and expect it to live.

A policeman had his notebook out, was taking names, details. Tobin stepped up and touched him on the shoulder. "I did it, officer. I pushed him."

The policeman pushed his hat back on his head and stared at him. "Yeah. Me, too. Fifty people see him try to run across and get hit, an' you pushed him. Better go home and sleep it off, buddy. Move on; I got things to do." He turned away.

A little dazed, Tobin was three blocks away before he realized he could have forced that policeman to believe him. He was halfway back to the crowded corner before he realized that then the policeman would have to take him in

for questioniong. An arrest was a penalty; something would happen to stop it! He was—invulnerable.

Tobin leaned wearily against a lamp-post and tried to think. Every murderer made fatal mistakes; evidently he was no exception. He knew it now. No matter what he did, who he killed or how, something would happen to save him from blame. There must be a way out!"

"He'd try again. He had to keep trying until he managed to commit an indisputable murder.

At the next corner another policeman was directing traffic. Tobin walked over to him and took the man's gun. The officer never missed it because of a rending crash at the far corner. A sedan and a coupé—The man ran away and left Tobin with the gun. He wouldn't miss it until Tobin was well out of sight; that was certain. Tobin followed him and helped himself to bullets. No one noticed—

He picked a busy corner and a likely-looking victim, a young man with a brief case. Tobin fired four times at twenty feet. The man screamed and fell, clawing at his chest. People ran toward him, gabbling. Some idiot collided violently with Tobin, sent the gun flying yards away. Another man picked it up—Why go into details? The police came and took the man away. No one had seen Tobin fire. The murdered man had screamed, and people had seen him fall. Tobin was left in the crowd while the Black Maria and the ambulance waited away with their unoffending cargoes.

It was a new and different Tobin who found his way into a small park and sat heavily on a bench. The cocky air was gone, and the breezy smile, and the lift from the shoulders. MacIlhainy Tobin could not know fear today, but his was bewilderment.

For the first time he noticed the shabby figure beside him. They recognized each other at the same time. The boy sprang to his feet.

"You! Who—what are you, anyway? You're the guy made me lie down under that truck this mornin'. I oughta—" He clutched the bench and weaved a little on his feet. Pickings apparently had not been so good. "Joke, I guess— Hell of a price you tried to make me pay to save yourself a couple nickels—" He walked off, trying to keep his head up.

Tobin watched him go. It never occurred to him that a dollar now would save a life. "Hell of a price—" The

words said themselves over and over in his tired brain. The price of lying down under that truck was—death.

Tobin sat there and laughed. He roared. Murder wasn't the only thing carrying a death penalty. There was—suicide!

Where, then? When? Some place where no one would bother him, and some means that couldn't fail? Poison? He'd throw it off. Ropes broke; guns missed fire. Gas wasn't certain. Knives broke or missed vital spots.

He finally faced it like the man he was. He couldn't kill himself because he couldn't be killed. He'd keep fighting until he won, or lost—he had never lost before—Ah, well. He hailed a cab and went home.

MacIlhainy Tobin dined in his usual lonely splendor. He was a little more himself, now. He felt a little rueful, but once he knew what he had to face, he could stand it. He'd die tonight, then. The richest, most powerful man in the history of the world, and he was going to die. It was grimly humorous. Why hadn't he taken a chance on boredom? He could have had his power indefinitely. He had stipulated that his power would last until he slept. As soon as he slept he would pay the penalty for paying no penalties—death. There *must* be a way! One more try—

"Landis!"

"Sir?"

"I want the whole household in the library in fifteen minutes—maids, gardeners, chauffeur, everyone. You, too."

"Very good, sir."

They were all there—twenty-six, including Landis. Tobin got them settled and then locked the door and put the key in his pocket.

"I've called you here as witnesses," he began. "I want your complete attention. All of you are to watch everything I do, hear every word I say, and remember your stories when the police come and question you. You are not to be surprised. There is to be no screaming, fainting, or interference. Riggs, Cramp, come here. And Landis."

The gardener and the chauffeur towered over the butler as they stood together. Tobin folded his arms and leaned back against the desk.

"Landis, you are not to resist or be frightened. Riggs, Cramp, hold him firmly." This ought to do the trick, thought Tobin. Pity he hadn't thought of it in the first place.

He went to the wall and lifted down a heavy scimitar. It was Damascus steel, and Tobin knew that it would pass the time-honored test of slicing a feather floating in midair.

"Hold your head to one side, Landis. That's it. Can everyone see? Very good."

He swung the blade high over his head and brought it down with all his strength. It seemed to melt into Landis' neck; Tobin thought it would never stop. He saw terror on the faces about him, but no one made a move. He had no idea there was so much blood in that scrawny body.

"Let him go." The dead man fell with a squasy thump.

"Now," said Tobin, "you are all to wait here quietly for one hour. Then call the police and tell them what has happened."

"Yes, Mr. Tobin," they chorused.

"Good-night, everyone."

A few minutes later he lay comfortably in bed and went over it all in his mind. The subtlety of it pleased him. Those murders this afternoon—they had failed because he had relied on coincidence to damn him. Coincidence had worked the other way. But, by merely setting his stage, he had nullified coincidence. He could not be blamed for the other murders, therefore he had done nothing to deserve a death penalty. He *must* be blamed for this one.

It had happened in his day of power, so he would not be penalized. A signed statement lay on the bureau, a carbon copy with an original signature was now in the mail. The fact that the penalty would, in the natural course of events, be brought to bear weeks or months from the time of the murder, did not matter. The fact remained that he had *done something to deserve a death penalty*. That was enough, and he was content with himself and the world.

He lay for a long while watching the butt of his cigarette burn to a white ash in the bedside tray. When it had gone out he yawned, stretched lazily and turned out the light. The last thing that he remembered was the faint tinkle of the doorbell. That would be the police. He smiled and went to sleep.

"He did it, then. Got away with it. I must say I'm sorry," I said to the man.

"Wait. I haven't finished."

"But—"

"He hadn't finished with his day of power—quite. Listen."

MacIlhainy Tobin awoke gently. He

(Continued on page 17)

THE PSYCHOMORPH

By E. A. GROSSER

*A very pleasing personality, the Psychomorph.
Always the person you most wanted to see—*

Two men sat in front of the entirely useless fireplace, watching the flames. They were roughing it in a centrally heated mountain lodge. Suddenly two words quavered on the crisp spring evening air:

"I'm co-oid!"

Baker, a few years older and heavier of build, mumbled at him around the stem of his pipe, "Well, move closer to the fire then, Manning. But don't cry about it."

Manning looked up. "What's the matter with you?" he asked resentfully. "I didn't say anything."

Baker sucked noisily at his pipe, got a drink, and made a wry face.

"Imagination, maybe," he said doubtfully after a moment. "I thought I heard someone say, 'I'm cold!'—almost crying."

"I was thinking," Manning replied indifferently; intimating that he hadn't said anything, hadn't heard anything, and didn't give a damn.

Baker grinned. "Thinking of Elaine?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. Peggy shouldn't have insisted. Elaine didn't want to go to town."

"And you didn't want her to go," Baker completed with a laugh. "It'll be different in a few years. Peggy was damned glad to get away from me for a while and I was just as glad to have her go."

"Don't you . . . uh . . . love her?"

"Sure! Don't be silly. But a change is good for anyone. She wouldn't look at another man—I hope!"

"I'm so cold. Let me in."

Both men tensed. The sound seemed to have come from outside.

"By God!" Baker exploded. "I didn't imagine that! Did you hear it, too?"

Manning nodded. Baker laid his pipe on the table and went to the door. Hand on the latch, he waited, listening.

"I'm so-o-o-o—" There was the sound of something falling.

Baker snatched open the door. Then he knelt beside the crumpled figure on the doorstep.

"You little fool! Don't you know enough to knock on a door?"

Smooth, silken blond hair had cascaded forward, hiding the face but exposing a

satin-skinned neck. The unconscious girl wasn't wearing a coat—just a light jacket over a colorful frock. Something about them struck Baker as familiar.

He grasped the soft shoulders and half lifted her, then brushed her hair from her face. The flesh was cold and puttylike beneath his hand, and the hair tangled his fingers as though alive. But he hardly noticed. His eyes were fastened on the quiet face.

"Peggy! Oh, God! They must have had an accident with the car!" He lifted the still form in his arms and started toward the bedroom. "Manning! You go down the mountain and find Elaine."

But Manning was staring at the figure in his arms like a man hypnotized. "Pat—Patricia," he mumbled. "You shouldn't have followed." He stepped forward with arms out, as though to take Baker's burden.

"Manning! You fool! Can't you hear? I'll take care of Peggy. You go down and find Elaine!"

The telephone started to ring, one or two short, sharp yelps and then a continuous strident alarm, as though the girl at central had grown tired and were resting on the switch.

Baker shouldered Manning aside. "Then answer that phone, and I'll get Elaine myself after I've taken care of Peggy."

He looked back as he went through the door and saw Manning moving toward the phone like an automaton. He kicked open the bedroom door and gently laid Peggy on the bed. Then hurried out to get the electric blanket. The coldness of her flesh frightened him.

Manning was standing at the table, telephone receiver dangling in his fingers. His eyes were pale and frightened as he looked up at Baker's entrance.

Baker started across the room toward the closet. Manning held out the telephone to him.

"Here," he said tonelessly.

Baker brushed him aside again. His lips curled as he looked at the younger man. "Aren't you a little curious about Elaine?"

Manning looked toward the door leading to the bedroom, then back at Baker. "Here," he said again.

"Hang up!" Baker said. "I haven't got time to talk to anyone now. Do you think it's within your capabilities to phone for a doctor?"

"Here," Manning insisted, offering the phone again. "It's Peggy. She wants to talk to you."

"Huh!" Baker ceased burrowing in the closet and faced Manning with questioning eyes.

"You're crazy," he said, but nevertheless he took the telephone from the younger man's hand.

"Hello!" he barked.

"O-o-oh! What a nasty voice you have!"

"The better to—" he started from habit, then halted. "Is that you, Peggy?"

"Uh-hm-m-m," she replied. "Who were you expecting?"

Baker ignored her question, though he couldn't doubt her words. Her voice was too familiar. But Peggy was in the bedroom!

"Are you sure?" he asked inanely.

"Yes, certain!" Peggy snapped. "And you leave the liquor alone for the rest of the evening." She stopped then, seeming to regret her words. "Listen, darling," she continued, "Drew Pierce's new picture, 'Sands of Flame,' is playing here tonight and Elaine and I want to see it. Do you mind?"

"Put it off! Will you, Peg? Somebody just wandered in and fainted on our doorstep."

He waited for her to speak, but she hesitated doubtfully. He knew what she was thinking. He hurried on: "She looks just like—" He stopped short. He had intended to tell her that the stranger looked just like her, but under the circumstances he knew that to be inadvisable. "She looks just like a queen—a beauty!"

"And you want me to come home?" Peggy teased.

"Yes! This is straight goods, Peg. Come on and give me a hand. There's something wrong. It's only pleasantly cool out tonight, yet she's as cold as an iceberg."

"Oh," Peggy said understandingly. Then she was serious. "I'll come, and bring a doctor."

"Thanks, baby. 'By."

He started to hang up, but a call from the phone made him put it back to his ear.

"George, darling," Peggy said.

"Yes?"

"If you're tight, I'll help him use a stomach pump on you."

"And I'll let you. It's a deal! Now, hurry!"

He put the phone back in its cradle and

turned to face Manning. Manning was gone! Baker listened and thought he heard a voice from the bedroom. He cursed and dug hurriedly in the closet until he located the electric blanket, then started back to the bedroom.

Manning was on his knees at the side of the bed. He held one of the strange girl's nearly frozen hands in his, pressing it to his lips.

"Patricia! Don't die! You must live! We have so much to live for—so much to do! We were silly to quarrel, and I was a beast to marry Elaine. I don't know why I did. I was mad! I wanted to hurt you!"

Baker stepped into the room. Manning looked up, flushed guiltily, but didn't leave the bedside.

"There's more to you, kid, than I thought," Baker grumbled, then smiled bitterly. "And to think I was giving you advice. Come on! Give me a hand!"

Together they wrapped the strange girl in the heating blanket, then watched. Gradually color came back to her face. Baker had to admit she was pretty; as pretty as Peggy had been on their wedding day. And so much like her that they might have been twin sisters.

"How is it you never mentioned knowing a girl who looks so much like Peggy?" he asked.

Manning looked at him oddly. "What do you mean—so much like Peggy? Patricia doesn't look anything like your wife."

Baker stared at him. "One of us is nuts," he said at last, and the stare left no doubt as to who, in his opinion, was the one.

Manning shrugged, and his eyes went back to the girl as though drawn by a magnet. Baker looked, too. Her cheeks, counterparts of Peggy's, were flushing with returning life. The tightness had left the mouth and it appeared soft and inviting.

"It's going to be rough on Elaine," he said.

"Don't say anything," Manning pleaded. "I'm the one to tell her."

"O.K., but see that you do. Don't be a bigger heel than you are already."

It was as though Manning hadn't heard him. Baker stared at a spot a trifle to one side of the point of the younger man's chin. He considered how nice it would feel to hit that spot with a bunch of knuckles. It was a raw deal he was handing to a young kid like Elaine!

He turned abruptly on his heel and went out the door, growling, "I guess you

can keep an eye on her until the girls and the doctor get here."

He went back to his seat in front of the fire and waited. He tried not to think. He listened. From the bedroom came Manning's pleading monotone. The damned young fool had no sense of shame! Baker gritted his teeth.

Then, for something to do, he cleaned and filled his pipe. Manning's pleas had ceased. The house was as silent as a mine, except for the crackling of the fire. He scratched a match to light his pipe.

A door creaked protestingly. Baker leaped to his feet and faced the direction from which the sound had come. Then the tenseness left his muscles.

The stranger was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, smiling, holding onto the door which he had left open as though to support herself. Her smile was infectious. Baker smiled. He looked past her, into the bedroom, expecting to see Manning directly behind her. But he wasn't to be seen.

"You should stay in bed," he reproved. He felt that it was like scolding Peggy. "Where's Manning?"

The strange girl smiled and stepped into the hall. She pulled the door shut and it creaked protestingly again. She walked toward him slowly, glidingly—smiling.

"The poor boy was tired," she said with a queerness in her voice that Baker hesitated to label an accent. "He was so tired that he fell asleep on his knees at the side of the bed with my hand at his lips. Oh, what a nice fire—so warm!"

She tugged at one of the chairs to draw it closer. Baker stooped to help her. His hands touched hers, and he tensed. Her flesh was as cold as a reptile's.

He looked up, and into eyes that were identical with Peggy's. He shook his head and shoved the chair nearer the fire. It was too much for him.

He sat down again in the other chair and struck another match to light his pipe. He puffed contentedly, waiting to see what she would say. He wished he had the nerve to ask how much she cared for Manning—wished he could persuade her to throw him down hard—to leave him for Elaine. Elaine—who had been almost pitifully happy for two months.

"You are a strange man," the girl said at last.

"Yes," Baker returned.

"Yes," she agreed with a dimpling smile. "The other—Manning—talks all the time. You talk not at all—just puff-puff-puff. And you look so comfortable."

It seemed to Baker that she moved im-

perceptibly closer to the fire. He watched her through narrowed eyes. "You speak as though you don't know Manning very well," he sparred.

She ignored his remark and stared at his pipe. "You look so comfortable," she repeated. "May I try it?"

"What? My pipe?"

She nodded, and Baker laughed.

"Anybody'd think you'd never seen a pipe before," he chuckled.

She was silent, so silent that Baker felt that he must have hurt her feelings. He held out the pipe to her. "Here, take a puff if you want to. But look out—it's strong."

He had to lean toward her to give her the pipe. She took it with a smile, looked at it strangely, then placed the stem between her lips. She breathed deeply.

Baker grinned, expecting her to cough. But she blew the smoke from her throat with an expression of disgust and returned the pipe. He took it, staring at her, and it was a moment before he became aware that their hands were still in contact.

An aura of power seemed to emanate from her, surround him, sap his will. Anyway, what was the difference? It would be like making love to Peggy, this stranger was so much like her. And he knew from the blue eyes so near his that she was willing. He leaned forward—and seemed to catapult into a mist-filled pit.

Cold fingers of fog curled around him, searching for—life. And sucking away all his warmth. It seemed hours that he shivered and trembled, then a voice reached him.

"No. Not all—now! Come back!"

He lifted his head. He had fallen sideways over the arm of his chair. He shook his head to clear his sight. He looked at the other chair. It was empty!

He heard feet on the stairs and a moment later the door opened to admit Peggy, Elaine, and a wizened doctor. Baker lumbered to his feet, staggered to meet them. Peggy watched him critically, then slipped her jacket off and laid it over the back of a chair.

"All right, doctor," she said, "the stomach pump."

"Wait! Peggy, I haven't been drinking."

"I didn't say you had. I just know you're higher than a kite."

"But she was here a minute ago," Baker said. He cursed the thickness of his tongue and the dullness of his mind. He couldn't seem to think.

Then he saw that they were staring past him. He turned. Peggy's replica was standing in the hall, watching them.

"Drew Pierce," Peggy breathed. "How did he get here?"

"Martha!" the doctor exclaimed. "Why didn't you stay home?"

Elaine ran across the room and threw herself into the strange girl's arms—kissed her. "It's been six hours since I left you, Fred, but it seems like a century."

"That's her!" Baker shouted, thinking of the stomach pump. "That's the patient."

"Her?" repeated Peggy. "Now I know your drunk. Calling Drew Pierce 'she,' or, rather, 'her'!"

She looked at him disgustedly, then started toward the hall, carefully going aside for Elaine and the strange girl. "It's a neat trick, Elaine. I never knew you had the nerve. Get ready Mr. Pierce. I'll be back in a moment like a flash."

She opened the bedroom door. The hinges squealed, then she screamed.

"George! George! Is he dead?"

Baker staggered toward her. He put his arm around her shoulder and guided her back into the hall. The doctor knelt beside the sprawled body on the floor.

Baker halted at the door of another bedroom and looked back to see Elaine huddling fearfully in the arms of the stranger. The stranger was walking slowly, almost gliding, toward the door of the room where the body lay. He waited to see what would happen.

The strange smile was still curving the unknown's lips. And there was no change when she looked into the room and saw the wizened doctor working over Manning.

But Elaine looked, started violently. She looked up into the face of the stranger, peered closely as though searching for something, then pressed closer.

Baker turned away and helped Peggy into the extra bedroom.

When they were inside, Peggy's hands gripped the lapels of his coat. "George," she whispered hoarsely, "did you kill him?"

He stared at her.

"Tell me! Tell me!" she insisted, still in a low voice and trying to shake him. "Did you kill Fred? Quick! Maybe you can get away! We'll rip out the phones and disable all the cars but ours. Maybe

we could make it to an airport and get out of the country."

His lips twitched as he held her away from him. "Listen, baby! I didn't kill anybody. I think your 'Drew Pierce' did! But don't you say a damned thing. There's something queer about 'him,' or 'her,' and they might pin it on me. You keep quiet, see?"

Peggy was quieter and looking at him with penetrating eyes. Then she said: "You needn't be afraid to tell me, if you did. I hated the dirty little stinker. I knew Patricia and why he married Elaine."

"Does Elaine know?"

"Certainly. 'Friends' saw to it that she found out. But she didn't care."

Baker hesitated. It was as though he were afraid to ask a question, but at last he forced it out: "What kind of a looking person was she?"

"Pretty—red hair, very fair skin with just enough freckles on her nose to make her pert. Oh, she was all right! And she had sense enough to see that Fred was a heel."

She stopped speaking and stared at Baker.

"What's the matter, George? You look sick!"

"I am! God! I wonder what it is."

"Wonder what what is?"

"That . . . that thing. To you it looks like Drew Pierce, the actor; to me it looks like you; to Elaine it is Fred; and the doctor thinks it is someone by the name of Martha."

"George! Haven't you been drinking?" There was a hysterical note in Peggy's voice as though she hoped he would say "Yes."

"No! I haven't had a drop since three o'clock this afternoon."

She believed; she had to. There was no reason for him to lie, and she knew he hadn't. Something very like an unconscious whimper came from deep within her throat.

Baker looked down at her. Her rouge showed like two bloody spots on her bloodless cheeks. There was a whiteness around her mouth that was only accentuated by the vividness of her lips. He drew her closer.

"Let's get out of here," she begged. "Let's go back to town."

"We can't, honey," he said, and kissed her. "That thing, whatever it is, is deadly. It killed Manning!"

"What do we care?" she demanded. "He was a dirty little rat. It served him right!"

"Peggy! He's dead!"

"What difference does that make? It doesn't make him a better man. I hope he roasts in hell!"

"Peggy! You're hysterical! You need rest."

"I do not! I want to leave here!"

He forced her toward the bed. "You lie down and rest for a while. I'll figure out some way to fix Peggy-Pierce-Fred-Martha, and then we'll leave."

She fought him, silently, determinedly. But in the end his superior strength prevailed. She was on the bed. He held her hands so she couldn't scratch. In a moment she ceased struggling and lay still, glaring up at him.

"Listen, baby," he pleaded. "We can't let that thing loose on the world. It isn't human! I know it—feel it!"

He waited, searching her face to see if he had made any impression. Her lips trembled and she caught the lower one between her white teeth. Her eyes filled with tears. She turned her head away.

"I want to go away."

He watched her. He knew the depths of her fear. Only the memory of those cold, searching mists made him resolve to stay and kill the thing. But that was no reason why Peggy should have to stay!

"The doctor will be going back before long. You can go with him."

"I want you to come."

"I have to stay," he burst out.

"I won't go unless you do."

He released her hands and stood up. "We'll see," he said. "Anyway, you must rest for a while."

She said nothing as he went out the door and closed it silently behind him. Then he stopped short. Peggy was standing in the hall.

It took a moment for him to realize that he wasn't seeing Peggy, but the stranger. Then he smiled bitterly and let his hand fall from the doorknob. The stranger smiled, too. And moved toward him.

It pressed close to his side and attempted to lift his arm over its shoulders. He shuddered and pushed it away. It staggered across the hall and brought up against the wall with a thump, and regarded him with sorrowful eyes.

Baker felt conscious-stricken. That bump must have hurt. The eyes were still on him, gentle and reproachful. He went to its side and helped it to its feet. Together they started down the hall toward the living room. His arm was around the stranger.

They came to the door of the room he had occupied with Peggy before the stranger had come, the room to which he had carried the stranger and in which it had killed Manning. He looked inside. Manning's body was gone. There was nothing unusual about its being gone; the doctor had probably moved it. But the fact seemed for a moment to thrust back the mists that were surrounding his mind.

With sudden determination he shoved the stranger from him and into the empty room. Then he slammed the door shut and tried to lock it. Futilely he cursed the maker of the lock. There was no key! It could only be locked from the inside!

He held the door tight while the stranger wailed, "Let me out! Please!"

After a moment he wondered why the thing didn't try the lock, try to pull the door open. It never touched the door; it only pleaded to be freed.

He released the doorknob and stepped back, waiting. Still the stranger didn't open the door. Baker grinned. Was it possible that it didn't know anything about doors; had never seen one before? Not if it were a creature of this Earth, he decided. But was there any proof, or even indication, that the stranger was of this planet? Might it not be a wanderer from some other hellish sphere?

He shivered and hurried to the living room, through it to the library and opened the table drawer. A small-caliber automatic lay atop some papers. He took it out, checked to see that it was loaded, then shoved it into his pocket.

When he went back to the living room the doctor had returned and was bending over a body on the floor near the fireplace that he hadn't noticed when he had passed through the room a moment ago. The doctor heard him and looked up. His wrinkled face and scrawny neck seemed to personify disapproval.

"See here!" he commanded. "What's going on here? I no sooner get one stiff into the car than I come back and find another one waiting for me. Why?"

He scrambled to his feet and stalked over to Baker like a bantam rooster. Baker tried to go around him, but the little dried-up fellow quickly blocked him. Baker looked down into the wizened doctor's eyes.

"Think it over for a while," he invited. "Maybe you'll come to the conclusion that they died."

"I think they were poisoned, and in my capacity as coroner I intend to hold post-mortems. I'm gonna warn the sheriff to keep an eye on you to see that you don't try to pull a sneak."

"O.K., go to it," Baker agreed. "But if you'll wait a while, we'll go to town with you."

The little doctor peered at him intently, then turned away to maneuver the additional body out to his car. It was characteristic of his insolent independence that he asked no help of anyone.

Baker watched him lift Elaine in his skinny arms and go out the door. Then his hand closed over the pistol in his pocket. He started forward again, then halted when Peggy came to meet him.

She was quieter, more self-composed. She smiled up at him wanly.

"Well?" she asked.

He pulled the pistol from his pocket. She looked at it curiously. He waited for her to speak, but she said nothing.

"That ought to take care of it," he offered grimly.

She hesitated, still staring at the pistol. "But it's so small," she objected at last.

"It'll blow her insides right out her back. That is, if it has any insides," he amended doubtfully. "We've never seen it as it really is, and I'm glad we haven't. We see only what we want to see—our ideal!" Then he grinned. "And you don't see me, do you? I ought to take you to court for that. It's incompatibility. Any judge would agree."

He waited for the answering smile he was trying to arouse, but none came.

"But, don't you think you ought to make sure?" she asked, seriously. "If you don't kill her, she'll follow us. Why don't you use fire? Fire is clean, and hot."

He considered. "By God, Peggy! That's a good idea! There are some five-gallon tins of gasoline in the garage. I'll get one. You keep an eye on that cocky little doctor while I go out the side door and bring one back."

He shoved the gun back into his pocket and ran to the garage. Then returned at a slower pace with a five-gallon can of the inflammable fluid under his arm. At the door he halted, listening. He could hear nothing, so he went in.

Peggy was at the front window, watching the doctor.

"O.K.?" he asked.

She nodded and stayed at the window while he went to the kitchen for a can opener. It took a few minutes to cut the

top away and expose the liquid. He looked up, anxious about the doctor.

Peggy was looking at him, and she nodded reassuringly. He looked back at the gasoline and at his arms where it had slopped.

"Peggy!" he called. "You'll have to help. Do you think you can?"

She came to him immediately, and he felt a surge of admiration for her courage. Then he outlined his plan:

"I can't touch it off because I got it all over me. I'll carry it to the door and set it on the floor. You carry a lighted candle and stay a couple of feet away from me. I'll swing the door open and take a couple of shots at it for luck, then I'll kick the gasoline over so it'll go into the room, and jump back out of the way. Then you throw the candle into the room to touch it off."

"All right," Peggy said, and Baker admired her calm determination.

He lifted the can and started down the hall. Again the mists were swirling around him. The stranger must realize her peril and was trying to kill him before he could injure her. He staggered and the can of gasoline almost slipped from his hands. It splashed over his clothes.

Then he straightened and grasped the can tighter. He had to! He must! That horrible thing must not be turned loose on the world.

He set the can down in front of the door and put his left hand on the knob. In his right he held the pistol. He hoped that the thing hadn't discovered how to open doors. If it had—well, their scheme was wrecked.

He twisted the knob and opened the door, silently. He looked in. It was on the bed. He flung the door open—fired two shots at it.

And he hit it, he knew. For it reared upward in the bed, arched its body stiffly with pain.

Baker leaped back out of the way and the candle flew through the doorway into the room. There was an explosive puff, then the room was a mass of flames. One scream came from the room and froze him with its anguish.

Then he and Peggy were stumbling down the hall and out of the house. The doctor had just finished his task and was coming toward the door. When he saw them he halted and turned back. Baker knew that he hadn't heard the shots and was glad that the pistol was of small caliber.

Baker stood at the side of the car looking back at the house. Flames were beginning to flicker at the windows. He was eager to get going.

"Come on, come on. Let's go!" he said impatiently.

"Keep your shirt on," the wizened doctor advised. "Is your wife staying here? Here, Martha, you sit in the middle. It will be warmer." He slapped the seat beside him.

Baker stared as Peggy got in.

"That will be nice," she said. "Warmer! And I've been so cold."

The pistol was still in Baker's pocket. He wanted to snatch it out and shoot—he willed himself to. But he climbed meekly into the car and sat down. He was enthralled by the stranger!

His face was serene—expressionless. But inside was a boiling mess of fear, hate, and grief. He knew now that he had been deluded into opening the wrong door.

HE SHUTTLES

(Continued from page 10)

smiled. That would be the police. He heard the faint tinkling of the doorbell. He reached up and turned on the light, stretched lazily and yawned. His eyes fell on the bedside tray. A wisp of smoke began curling from the dead ash there; a tiny sliver of paper appeared and grew into a cigarette butt. He was quite content with himself and the world—The smoke was curling *downward* toward the butt, not from it, something deep inside his mind told him. Thoughts of the penalty, of the statements, of the afternoon's murders slipped through his mind. After a while he gripped the edge of the sheet, pressed it from him. He arose, pushed his pajamas off. His trunks sailed from a nearby chair into his hand; he bent and laid them on the floor, stepped into them. They flowed up his legs after he was standing straight up; he caught the waist, pulled it together. A button flung itself from the floor, placed itself over the buttonhole, the threads that held it intact again. He finished dressing like a man in a movie film run backward—it was running backward.

Backward, he went to the door, down the stairs, into the library. Backward he did the murder, saw Landis' corpse lift limply into the grip of the two servants, pulled the scimitar out of the wound

while blood flowed into it, lifted it high over his head, hung it on the wall—and all the while he was talking gibberish, a horrible language, spoken with inhalations. He went back to the table and ate, and eating was revolting. He went backward out of the house, the cab driver handed him money, backed swiftly up to the park. He saw the boy again, the murders—everything. Until finally he got back home, disgorged his breakfast neatly, went upstairs, pressed his clothes off, wet himself with a towel, got into the tub and climbed out dry; went to bed. Landis moved about softly, backward, closing the curtains—Tobin drifted off to sleep, and as soon as it enveloped him—

"Six o'clock, sir."

"Ah—Landis. Good. Has Synthetic Rubber moved?"

And so he began again his day of power. Again he ordered a shabby youth to kill himself, and swept into his office to start the day, and arranged for the transfers, and ordered Krill to die, and went through all those senseless murders, and went home, and killed Landis, and went to bed. And again, just after he closed his eyes, he heard the doorbell. That would be the police. Again he smiled, and watched the cigarette grow in the ash tray, and again he killed Landis, and again, and again, and again, he lived through his day, backward and forward, backward and forward. His body did as it had done the first time, and so did his mind, but there was something deep inside him, something that neither he nor I could touch nor destroy, that wept and wailed and had no will, that suffered and cried, and knew utmost horror, and had not strength enough even to go mad—it was the only way. He could not die, for he deserved death and denied himself death.

Tobin has another wish coming when he wakes in the morning.

"That story is true," said the man.

"I—believe it. Ed—when did it happen?" I said.

"When? When? You speak of time, and MacIlhainy Tobin?"

"Oh—why did you tell me this story?"

"Because after MacIlhainy Tobin had two wishes, he—stopped. If I grant a man wishes, I must grant him three. So you—see my work here is finished. I want you to tell people. I can do no more here." And he left me.

Perhaps he was never here at all. But this is the story I wrote last night.

WHEN IT WAS MOONLIGHT

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

A writer of articles, one E. Allan Poe, sets forth to investigate a story of burial alive. Perhaps—it wasn't?

Let my heart be still a moment, and this mystery explore.

—THE RAVEN.

His hand, as slim as a white claw, dipped a quillful of ink and wrote in one corner of the page the date—March 3, 1842. Then:

THE PREMATURE BURIAL

By Edgar A. Poe

He hated his middle name, the name of his miserly and spiteful stepfather. For a moment he considered crossing out even the initial; then he told himself that he was only wool-gathering, putting off the drudgery of writing. And write he must, or starve—the *Philadelphia Dollar Newspaper* was clamoring for the story he had promised. Well, today he had heard a tag of gossip—his mother-in-law had it from a neighbor—that revived in his mind a subject always fascinating.

He began rapidly to write, in a fine copperplate hand:

There are certain themes of which the interest is all-absorbing, but which are entirely too horrible for the purposes of legitimate fiction—

This would really be an essay, not a tale, and he could do it justice. Often he thought of the whole world as a vast fat cemetery, close set with tombs in which not all the occupants were at rest—too many struggled unavailingly against their smothering shrouds, their locked and weighted coffin lids. What were his own literary labors, he mused, but a struggle against being shut down and throttled by a society as heavy and grim and senseless as clods heaped by a sexton's spade?

He paused, and went to the slate mantelshelf for a candle. His kerosene lamp had long ago been pawned, and it was dark for mid-afternoon, even in March. Elsewhere in the house his mother-in-law swept busily, and in the room next to his sounded the quiet breathing of his invalid wife. Poor

Virginia slept, and for the moment knew no pain. Returning with his light, he dipped more ink and continued down the sheet:

To be buried while alive is, beyond question, the most terrific of these extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality. That it has frequently, very frequently, fallen will scarcely be denied.

Again his dark imagination savored the tale he had heard that day. It had happened here in Philadelphia, in this very quarter, less than a month ago. A widower had gone, after weeks of mourning to his wife's tomb, with flowers. Stooping to place them on the marble slab, he had heard noise beneath. At once joyful and aghast, he fetched men and crowbars, and recovered the body, all untouched by decay. At home that night, the woman returned to consciousness.

So said the gossip, perhaps exaggerated, perhaps not. And the house was only six blocks away from Spring Garden Street, where he sat.

Poe fetched out his notebooks and began to marshal bits of narrative for his composition—a gloomy tale of resurrection in Baltimore, another from France, a genuinely creepy citation from the *Chirurgical Journal* of Leipzig; a sworn case of revival by electrical impulses, of a dead man in London. Then he added an experience of his own, romantically embellished, a dream adventure of his boyhood in Virginia. Just as he thought to make an end, he had a new inspiration.

Why not learn more about that reputed Philadelphia burial and the one who rose from seeming death? It would point up his piece, give it a timely local climax, ensure acceptance—he could hardly risk a rejection. Too, it would satisfy his own curiosity. Laying down the pen, Poe got up. From a peg he took his wide black hat, his old military cloak that he had worn since his ill-fated cadet days at West Point. Huddling it round his slim little body, he opened the front door and went out.

March had come in like a lion and, lionlike, roared and rampaged over Philadelphia. Dry, cold dust blew up into Poe's full gray eyes, and he hardened his mouth under the gay dark mustache. His shins felt goosefleshy; his striped trousers were unseasonably thin and his shoes badly needed mending. which way lay his journey?

He remembered the name of the street, and something about a ruined garden. Eventually he came to the place, or what must be the place—the garden was certainly ruined, full of dry, hardy weeds that still stood in great ragged clumps after the hard winter. Poe forced open the creaky gate, went up the rough-flagged path to the stoop. He saw a bronzed nameplate—"Gaubert," it said. Yes, that was the name he had heard. He swung the knocker loudly, and thought he caught a whisper of movement inside. But the door did not open.

"Nobody lives there, Mr. Poe," said someone from the street. It was a grocery boy, with a heavy basket on his arm. Poe left the doorstep. He knew the lad; indeed he owed the grocer eleven dollars.

"Are you sure?" Poe prompted.

"Well"—and the boy shifted the weight of his burden—"if anybody lived here, they'd buy from our shop, wouldn't they? And I'd deliver, wouldn't I? But I've had this job for six months, and never set foot inside that door."

Poe thanked him and walked down the street, but did not take the turn that would lead home. Instead he sought the shop of one Pemberton, a printer and a friend, to pass the time of day and ask for a loan.

Pemberton could not lend even one dollar—times were hard—but he offered a drink of Monongahela whiskey, which Poe forced himself to refuse; then a supper of crackers, cheese and garlic sausage, which Poe thankfully shared. At home, unless his mother-in-law had begged or borrowed from the neighbors, would be only bread and molasses. It was past sundown when the writer shook hands with Pemberton, thanked him with warm courtesy for his hospitality, and ventured into the evening.

Thank Heaven, it did not rain. Poe was saddened by storms. The wind had abated and the March sky was clear save for a tiny fluff of scudding cloud and a banked dark line at the horizon, while up rose a full moon the color of

frozen cream. Poe squinted from under his hat brim at the shadow-pattern on the disk. Might he not write another story of a lunar voyage—like the one about Hans Pfaal, but dead serious this time? Musing thus, he walked along the dusk-filling street until he came again opposite the ruined garden, the creaky gate, and the house with the doorplate marked: "Gaubert."

Hi-lo, the grocery boy had been wrong. There was light inside the front window, water-blue light—or was there? Anyway, motion—yes, a figure stooped there, as if to peer out at him.

Poe turned in at the gate, and knocked at the door once again.

Four or five moments of silence; then he heard the old lock grating. The door moved inward, slowly and noisily. Poe fancied that he had been wrong about the blue light, for he saw only darkness inside. A voice spoke:

"Well, sir?"

The two words came huskily but softly, as though the door-opener scarcely breathed. Poe swept off his broad black hat and made one of his graceful bows.

"If you will pardon me—" He paused, not knowing whether he addressed man or woman. "This is the Gaubert residence?"

"It is," was the reply, soft, hoarse and sexless. "Your business, sir?"

Poe spoke with official crispness; he had been a sergeant-major of artillery before he was twenty-one, and knew how to inject the proper note. "I am here on public duty," he announced. "I am a journalist, tracing a strange report."

"Journalist?" repeated his interrogator. "Strange report? Come in, sir."

Poe complied, and the door closed abruptly behind him, with a rusty snick of the lock. He remembered being in jail once, and how the door of his cell had slammed just so. It was not a pleasant memory. But he saw more clearly, now he was inside—his eyes got used to the tiny trickle of moonlight.

He stood in a dark hallway, all paneled in wood, with no furniture, drapes or pictures. With him was a woman, in full skirt and down-drawn lace cap, a woman as tall as he and with intent eyes that glowed as from within. She neither moved nor spoke, but waited for him to tell her more of his errand.

Poe did so, giving his name and, stretching a point, claiming to be a sub-editor of the *Dollar Newspaper*, definitely

assigned to the interview. "And now, madam, concerning this story that is rife concerning a premature burial—"

She had moved very close, but as his face turned toward her she drew back. Poe fancied that his breath had blown her away like a feather; then, remembering Penberton's garlic sausage, he was chagrined. To confirm his new thought, the woman was offering him wine—to sweeten his breath.

"Would you take a glass of canary, Mr. Poe?" she invited, and opened a side door. He followed her into a room paper in pale blue. Moonglow, drenching it, reflected from that paper and seemed an artificial light. That was what he had seen from outside. From an undraped table his hostess lifted a bottle, poured wine into a metal goblet and offered it.

Poe wanted that wine, but he had recently promised his sick wife, solemnly and honestly, to abstain from even a sip of the drink that so easily upset him. Through thirsty lips he said: "I thank you kindly, but I am a temperance man."

"Oh," and she smiled. Poe saw white teeth. Then: "I am Elva Gauber—Mrs. John Gauber. The matter of which you ask I cannot explain clearly, but it is true. My husband was buried, in the Eastman Lutheran Churchyard—"

"I had heard, Mrs. Gauber, that the burial concerned a woman."

"No, my husband. He had been ill. He felt cold and quiet. A physician, a Dr. Mechem, pronounced him dead, and he was interred beneath a marble slab in his family vault." She sounded weary, but her voice was calm. "This happened shortly after the New Year. On Valentine's Day, I brought flowers. Beneath his slab he stirred and struggled. I had him brought forth. And he lives after a fashion—today."

"Lives today?" repeated Poe. "In this house?"

"Would you care to see him? Interview him?"

Poe's heart raced, his spine chilled. It was his peculiarity that such sensations gave him pleasure. "I would like nothing better," he assured her, and she went to another door, an inner one.

Opening it, she paused on the threshold, as though summoning her resolution for a plunge into cold, swift water. Then she started down a flight of steps.

Poe followed, unconsciously drawing the door shut behind him.

The gloom of midnight, of prison—

yes, of the tomb—fell at once upon those stairs. He heard Elva Gauber gasp:

"No—the moonlight—let it in—" And then she fell, heavily and limply, rolling downstairs.

Aghast, Poe quickly groped his way after her. She lay against a door at the foot of the flight, wedged against the panel. He touched her—she was cold and rigid, without motion or elasticity of life. His thin hand groped for and found the knob of the lower door, flung it open. More dim reflected moonlight, and he made shift to drag the woman into it.

Almost at once she sighed heavily, lifted her head, and rose. "How stupid of me," she apologized hoarsely.

"The fault was mine," protested Poe. "Your nerves, your health, have naturally suffered. The sudden dark—the closeness—overcame you." He fumbled in his pocket for a tinderbox. "Suffer me to strike a light."

But she held out a hand to stop him. "No, no. The moon is sufficient." She walked to a small, oblong pane set in the wall. Her hands, thin as Poe's own, with long grubby nails, hooked on the sill. Her face, bathed in the full light of the moon, strengthened and grew calm. She breathed deeply, almost voluptuously. "I am quite recovered," she said. "Do not fear for me. You need not stand so near, sir."

He had forgotten that garlic odor, and drew back contritely. She must be as sensitive to the smell as . . . as . . . what was it that was sickened and driven away by garlic? Poe could not remember, and took time to note that they were in a basement, stone-walled and with a floor of dirt. In one corner water seemed to drip, forming a dank pool of mud. Close to this, set into the wall, showed a latched trapdoor of planks, thick and wide, cleated crosswise, as though to cover a window. But no window would be set so low. Everything smelt earthy and close, as though fresh air had been shut out for decades.

"Your husband is here?" he inquired.

"Yes." She walked to the shutter-like trap, unlatched it and drew it open.

The recess beyond was as black as ink, and from it came a feeble mutter. Poe followed Elva Gauber, and strained his eyes. In a little stone-flagged nook a bed had been made up. Upon it lay a man, stripped almost naked. His skin was as white as dead bone, and only his eyes, now opening, had life. He

gazed at Elva Gauber, and past her at Poe.

"Go away," he mumbled.

"Sir," ventured Poe formally, "I have come to hear of how you came to life in the grave—"

"It's a lie," broke in the man on the pallet. He writhed halfway to a sitting posture, laboring upward as against a crushing weight. The wash of moonlight showed how wasted and fragile he was. His face stared and snarled bare-toothed, like a skull. "A lie, I say!" he cried, with a sudden strength that might well have been his last. "Told by this monster who is not—my wife—"

The shutter-trap slammed upon his cries. Elva Gauber faced Poe, withdrawing a pace to avoid his garlic breath.

"You have seen my husband," she said. "Was it a pretty sight, sir?"

He did not answer, and she moved across the dirt to the stair doorway. "Will you go up first?" she asked. "At the top, hold the door open, that I may have—" She said "life," or, perhaps, "light." Poe could not be sure which.

Plainly she, who had almost welcomed his intrusion at first, now sought to lead him away. Her eyes, compelling as shouted commands, were fixed upon him. He felt their power, and bowed to it.

Obediently he mounted the stairs, and stood with the upper door wide. Elva Gauber came up after him. At the top her eyes again seized his. Suddenly Poe knew more than ever before about the mesmeric impulses he loved to write about.

"I hope," she said measuredly, "that you have not found your visit fruitless. I live here alone—seeing nobody, caring for the poor thing that was once my husband, John Gauber. My mind is not clear. Perhaps my manners are not good. Forgive me, and good night."

Poe found himself ushered from the house, and outside the wind was howling once again. The front door closed behind him, and the lock grated.

The fresh air, the whip of gale in his face, and the absence of Elva Gauber's impelling gaze suddenly brought him back, as though from sleep, to a realization of what had happened—or what had not happened.

He had come out, on this uncomfortable March evening, to investigate the report of a premature burial. He had seen a ghastly sick thing, that had called the gossip a lie. Somehow, then, he had been drawn abruptly away—stopped from full study of what might be one of the

strangest adventures it was ever a writer's good fortune to know. Why was he letting things drop at this stage?

He decided not to let them drop. That would be worse than staying away altogether.

He made up his mind, formed quickly a plan. Leaving the doorstep, he turned from the gate, slipped quickly around the house. He knelt by the foundation at the side, just where a small oblong pane was set flush with the ground.

Bending his head, he found that he could see plainly inside, by reason of the flood of moonlight—a phenomenon, he realized, for generally an apartment was disclosed only by light within. The open doorway to the stairs, the swamp mess of mud in the corner, the out-flung trapdoor, were discernible. And something stood or huddled at the exposed niche—something that bent itself upon and above the frail white body of John Gauber.

Full skirt, white cap—it was Elva Gauber. She bent herself down, her face was touching the face or shoulder of her husband.

Poe's heart, never the healthiest of organs, began to drum and race. He pressed closer to the pane, for a better glimpse of what went on in the cellar. His shadow cut away some of the light. Elva Gauber turned to look.

Her face was as pale as the moon itself. Like the moon, it was shadowed in irregular patches. She came quickly, almost running, toward the pane where Poe crouched. He saw her, plainly and at close hand.

Dark, wet, sticky stains lay upon her mouth and cheeks. Her tongue roved out, licking at the stains—

Blood!

Poe sprang up and ran to the front of the house. He forced his thin, trembling fingers to seize the knocker, to swing it heavily again and again. When there was no answer, he rushed heavily against the door itself—it did not give. He moved to a window, rapped on it, pried at the sill, lifted his fist to smash the glass.

A silhouette moved beyond the pane, and threw it up. Something shot out at him like a pale snake striking—before he could move back, fingers had twisted in the front of his coat. Elva Gauber's eyes glared into his.

Her cap was off, her dark hair fallen in disorder. Blood still smeared and dewed her mouth and jowls.

"You have pried too far," she said, in a voice as measured and cold as the drip from icicles. "I was going to spare you,

because of the odor about you that repelled me—the garlic. I showed you a little, enough to warn any wise person, and let you go. Now—”

Poe struggled to free himself. Her grin was immovable, like the clutch of a steel trap. She grimaced in triumph, yet she could not quite face him—the garlic still clung to his breath.

“Look in my eyes,” she bade him. “Look—you cannot refuse, you cannot escape. You will die, with John—and the two of you, dying, shall rise again like me. I’ll have two fountains of life while you remain—two companions after you die.”

“Woman,” said Poe, fighting against her stabbing gaze, “you are mad.”

She snickered gustily. “I am sane, and so are you. We both know that I speak the truth. We both know the futility of your struggle.” Her voice rose a little. “Through a chink in the tomb, as I lay dead, a ray of moonlight streamed and struck my eyes. I woke. I struggled. I was set free. Now at night, when the moon shines—*Ugh!* Don’t breathe that herb in my face!”

She turned her head away. At that instant it seemed to Poe that a curtain of utter darkness fell, and with it sank down the form of Elva Gauber.

He peered in the sudden gloom. She was collapsed across the window sill, like a discarded puppet in its booth. Her hand still twisted in the bosom of his coat, and he pried himself loose from it, finger by steel, cold finger. Then he turned to flee from this place of shadowed peril to body and soul.

As he turned, he saw whence had come the dark. A cloud had come up from its place on the horizon—the fat, sooty bank he had noted there at sundown—and now it obscured the moon. Poe paused, in mid-retreat, gazing.

His thoughtful eye gauged the speed and size of the cloud. It curtained the moon, would continue to curtain it for—well, ten minutes. And for that ten minutes Elva Gauber would lie motionless, lifeless. She had told the truth about the moon giving her life. Hadn’t she fallen like one slain on the stairs when they were darkened. Poe began grimly to string the evidence together.

It was Elva Gauber, not her husband, who had died and gone to the family vault. She had come back to life, or a mockery of life, by touch of the moon’s rays. Such light was an unpredictable force—it made dogs howl, it flogged mad-

men to violence, it brought fear, or black sorrow, or ecstasy. Old legends said that it was the birth of fairies, the transformation of werewolves, the motive power of broom-riding witches. It was surely the source of the strength and evil animating what had been the corpse of Elva Gauber—and he, Poe, must not stand there dreaming.

He summoned all the courage that was his, and scrambled in at the window through which slumped the woman’s form. He groped across the room to the cellar door, opened it and went down the stairs, through the door at the bottom, and into the stone-walled basement.

It was dark, moonless still. Poe paused only to bring forth his tinder box, strike a light and kindle the end of a tightly twisted linen rag. It gave a feeble steady light, and he found his way to the shutter, opened it and touched the naked, wasted shoulder of John Gauber.

“Get up,” he said. “I’ve come to save you.”

The skullface feebly shifted its position to meet his gaze. The man managed to speak, moaningly:

“Useless. I can’t move—unless she lets me. Her eyes keep me here—half alive. I’d have died long ago, but somehow—”

Poe thought of a wretched spider, paralyzed by the sting of a mud-wasp. Lying helpless in its captive’s close den until the hour of feeding comes. He bent down, holding his blazing tinder close. He could see Gauber’s neck, and it was a mass of tiny puncture wounds, some of them still beaded with blood drops fresh or dried. He winced, but bode firm in his purpose.

“Let me guess the truth,” he said quickly. “Your wife was brought home from the grave, came back to a seeming of life. She put a spell on you, or played a trick—made you a helpless prisoner. That isn’t contrary to nature, that last. I’ve studied mesmerism.”

“It’s true” John Gauber mumbled.

“And nightly she comes to drink your blood?”

Gauber weakly nodded. “Yes. She was beginning just now, but ran upstairs. She will be coming back.”

“Good,” said Poe bleakly. “Perhaps she will come back to more than she expects. Have you ever heard of vampires? Probably not, but I have studied them, too. I began to guess, I think, when first she was so repelled by the odor of garlic. Vampires lie motionless by day, and walk and feed at night. They are creatures of the moon—their food is blood. Come.”

Poe broke off, put out his light, and

lifted the man in his arms. Gauber was as light as a child. The writer carried him to the slanting shelter of the closed-in staircase, and there set him against the wall. Over him Poe spread his old cadet cloak. In the gloom, the gray of the cloak harmonized with the gray of the wall stones. The poor fellow would be well hidden.

Next Poe flung off his coat, waistcoat and shirt. Heaping his clothing in a deeper shadow of the stairway, he stood up, stripped to the waist. His skin was almost as bloodlessly pale as Gauber's, his chest and arms almost as gaunt. He dared believe that he might pass momentarily for the unfortunate man.

The cellar sprang full of light again. The cloud must be passing from the moon. Poe listened. There was a dragging sound above, then footsteps.

Elva Gauber, the blood drinker by night, had revived.

Now for it. Poe hurried to the niche, thrust himself in and pulled the trapdoor shut after him.

He grinned, sharing a horrid paradox with the blackness around him. He had heard all the fabled ways of destroying vampires—transfixing stakes, holy water, prayer, fire. But he, Edgar Allan Poe, had evolved a new way. Myriads of tales whispered frighteningly of fiends lying in wait for normal men, but who ever heard of a normal man lying in wait for a fiend? Well, he had never considered himself normal, in spirit, or brain, or taste.

He stretched out, feet together, hands crossed on his bare midriff. Thus it would be in the tomb, he found himself thinking. To his mind came a snatch of poetry by a man named Bryant, published long ago in a New England review—*Breathless darkness, and the narrow house*. It was breathless and dark enough in this hole. Heaven knew, and narrow as well. He rejected, almost hysterically, the implication of being buried. To break the ugly spell, that daunted him where thought of Elva Gauber failed, he turned sideways to face the wall, his naked arm lying across his cheek and temple.

As his ear touched the musty bedding, it brought to him once again the echo of footsteps, footsteps descending stairs. They were rhythmic, confident. They were eager.

Elva Gauber was coming to seek again her interrupted rest.

Now she was crossing the floor. She did not pause or turn aside—she had not noticed her husband, lying under the cadet cloak in the shadow of the stairs.

The noise came straight to the trapdoor, and he heard her fumbling for the latch.

Light, blue as skimmed milk, poured into his nook. A shadow fell in the midst of it, full upon him. His imagination, ever outstripping reality, whispered that the shadow had weight, like lead—oppressive, baleful.

"John," said the voice of Elva Gauber in his ear, "I've come back. You know why—you know what for." Her voice sounded greedy, as though it came through loose, trembling lips. "You're my only source of strength now. I thought tonight, that a stranger—but he got away. He had a cursed odor about him, anyway."

Her hand touched the skin of his neck. She was prodding him, like a butcher fingering a doomed beast.

"Don't hold yourself away from me, John," she was commanding, in a voice of harsh mockery. "You know it won't do any good. This is the night of the full moon, and I have power for anything, anything!" She was trying to drag his arm away from his face. "You won't gain by—" She broke off, aghast. Then, in a wild-dry-throated scream:

"You're not John!"

Poe whipped over on his back, and his bird-claw hands shot out and seized her—one hand clinching upon her snaky disorder of dark hair, the other digging its fingertips into the chill flesh of her arm.

The scream quivered away into a horrible breathless rattle. Poe dragged his captive violently inward, throwing all his collected strength into the effort. Her feet were jerked from the floor and she flew into the recess, hurtling above and beyond Poe's recumbent body. She struck the inner stones with a crashing force that might break bones, and would have collapsed upon Poe; but, at the same moment, he had released her and slid swiftly out upon the floor of the cellar.

With frantic haste he seized the edge of the back-flung trapdoor. Elva Gauber struggled up on hands and knees, among the tumbled bed-clothes in the niche; then Poe had slammed the panel shut.

She threw herself against it from within, yammering and wailing like an animal in a trap. She was almost as strong as he, and for a moment he thought that she would win out of the niche. But, sweating and wheezing, he bore against the planks with his shoulder,

bracing his feet against the earth. His fingers found the latch, lifted it, forced it into place.

"Dark," moaned Elva Gauber from inside. "Dark—no moon—" Her voice trailed off.

Poe went to the muddy pool in the corner, thrust in his hands. The muck was slimy but workable. He pushed a double handful of it against the trap-door, sealing cracks and edges. Another handful, another. Using his palms like trowels, he coated the boards with thick mud.

"Gauber," he said breathlessly, "how are you?"

"All right—I think." The voice was strangely strong and clear. Looking over his shoulder, Poe saw that Gauber had come upright of himself, still pale but apparently steady. "What are you doing?" Gauber asked.

"Walling her up," jerked out Poe, scooping still more mud. "Walling her up forever, with her devil.

He had a momentary flash of inspiration, a symbolic germ of a story; in it a man sealed a woman into such a nook of the wall, and with her an embodiment of active evil—perhaps in the form of a black cat.

Pausing at last to breathe deeply, he smiled to himself. Even in the direst of danger, the most heartbreaking moment of toil and fear, he must ever be coining new plots for stories.

"I cannot thank you enough," Gauber was saying to him. "I feel that all will be well—if only she stays there."

Poe put his ear to the wall. "Not a whisper of motion, sir. She's shut off from moonlight—from life and power. Can you help me with my clothes. I feel terribly chilled."

His mother-in-law met him on the threshold when he returned to the house in Spring Garden Street. Under the white widow's cap, her strong-boned face was drawn with worry.

"Eddie, are you ill?" She was really asking if he had been drinking. A look reassured her. "No," she answered herself, "but you've been away from home

so long. And you're dirty, Eddie—filthy. You must wash."

He let her lead him in, pour hot water into a basin. As he scrubbed himself, he formed excuses, a banal lie about a long walk for inspiration, a moment of dizzy weariness, a stumble into a mud puddle.

"I'll make you some nice hot coffee, Eddie," his mother-in-law offered.

"Please," he responded, and went back to his room with the slate mantelpiece. Again he lighted the candle, sat down and took up his pen.

His mind was embellishing the story inspiration that had come to him at such a black moment, in the cellar of the Gauber house. He'd work on that tomorrow. The *United States Saturday Post* would take it, he hoped. Title? He would call it simply "The Black Cat."

But to finish the present task! He dipped his pen in ink. How to begin? How to end? How, after writing and publishing such an account, to defend himself against the growing whisper of his insanity?

He decided to forget it, if he could—at least to seek healthy company, comfort, quiet—perhaps even to write some light verse, some humorous articles and stories. For the first time in his life, he had had enough of the macabre.

Quickly he wrote a final paragraph:

There are moments when, even to the sober eye of Reason, the world of our sad Humanity may assume the semblance of a Hell—but the imagination of man is no Carathis, to explore with impunity its every cavern. Alas! The grim legion of sepulchral terrors cannot be regarded as altogether fanciful—but, like the Demons in whose company Afrasiab made his voyage down the Oxus, they must sleep, or they will devour us—they must be suffered to slumber, or we will perish.

That would do for the public, decided Edgar Allan Poe. In any case, it would do for the Philadelphia *Dollar Newspaper*.

His mother-in-law brought in the coffee.



WELL OF THE ANGELS

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

There is a legend of two Angels that Allah sent down—and punished. And they can grant any wish. For a payment—

MOSUL was asleep that afternoon. That dingy hell on the Tigris always dozed through the unbearable heat of the day. Dave Cooper, however, had not learned to sleep, so he sat under the sluggish electric fan in his office and sweated. He cursed the oil company and its five-year grip on him. He cursed the flies, the dust, the glare that came in through the jealousies which screened the windows.

He drained his glass of warm soda and brandy. In the anteroom, Hassan, the middle-aged office boy, snored contentedly. Somehow, between refilling glasses, Hassan could manage naps. This infuriated Cooper. He said aloud, and bitterly, "Three years, six months, and eleven days more of this hell's hole!"

He blinked and squinted at the calendar. His voice cracked a little when he corrected himself. "No, damn it! Three years, six months, eleven and a half days. Today's not over!"

He hurled his glass against the filing cabinet. He liked the sound. He hoped that someone's bare feet would step into the fragments. He hoped especially that it would be Hassan. He disliked that chinless Arab and his mission English; though most of all he hated anyone who could sleep.

Cooper's predecessors, Hassan cheerfully announced that first day, had either died or gone mad in less than three years. "To be exact, sir," the wizened fellow proudly summed up, "the average is two years, eleven months, twenty-four days. Forty-seven percents die of diverse causes. Fifty-three percents are carried to Bagdad for observation and treatment."

But out of that sleeplessness and misery came an idea; suddenly, it seemed to Cooper, though actually he had been brooding on it unconsciously ever since hearing bazaar gossip about the peculiar nature of Mosul and the adjoining country. This was something the company had not anticipated. He walked swiftly into the anteroom, where Hassan squatted on the floor.

He was snoring. Flies buzzed about his gaping mouth. He wore a skullcap, a dirty

aba, and no shoes. Cooper booted him. Hassan muttered. A second kick made him blink and say in Arabic, "I betake me to Allah for refuge from Satan!" Then, looking up: "Ah wah, sahib! Yes, sir. What is your pleasure, sir? Another brandy-soda, sir? At once, sir."

For once parrotlike mission English did not irritate Cooper, nor servility, either. "No. I want some lessons in magic."

"Magic, sahib?"

"Exactly. Don't pretend you don't understand. This is the old plain of Babil. Babel they called it at the mission school. Everyone knows the place is filthy with magicians."

Hassan's mouth opened. He gaped and stood there fingering his straggly beard. Then he grinned, winked. "None of the others thought of *that*. My word, sahib! You will fool the company, what?"

One could not just walk out. There was a train to Bagdad, yes. But life ended shortly after one quit the protection of the company and the King of Iraq. Prowling Arabs and Kurds attended to that. Inviting murder and robbery just to spite an employer was pointless.

A supervisor, coming up from Bagdad one week, listened to Cooper's grief. He sighed wearily and said, "You're here, and you're staying here. I'm sorry, old fellow, but that's how it is. A magician might get you a transfer, but nobody else."

A magician, Cooper, looking back, smiled craftily. Wouldn't good old Mr. Burleigh look foolish when the news got to Bagdad!

When Cooper reached for his sun helmet and stalked out of the office, he was not cursing Mosul and the desolation that spreads far in every direction. The Sinjar Hills rose burned and brown from a burned, brown desert. Their caverns were the homes of Yezidi devil worshippers.

Across the slugeish Tigris was what remained of Nineveh. A dead city. Everything in this accursed plain of Babil was dead. Kalah and Asshur, Hadra and Dar Sharrukin, they surrounded Mosul with mounds that were the graves of cities

Archaeologists used to prowling among these mounds, but since Cooper came to town there had been no digging for bricks with cuneiform inscriptions.

The ferocity of the sun was abating. The snoring ceased in the shops of the mean bazaars. Coppersmiths resumed their hammering, Cobblers and saddlers set to work again, and the dry, hot air reeked of leather. Tall Kurds with massive turbans wound about high conical felt caps walked haughtily down the fly-infested streets.

Wool and dried apricots and gum tragacanth that caravans had brought down from Kurdistan to the river barges gave an alien tang to the air. Far off in the hills, oil derricks rose, gaunt and black. The hot wind brought a petroleum smell that partly masked the reek of the town. There was a cigarette-paper factory, and not far from it a rug bazaar, where merchants sold carpets from Senna and Bijar.

A long time ago Cooper had been an amiable fellow with a purpose and an ambition. Now he was lean and haggard. His eyes were permanently bloodshot. Even without his drinking, the flies and the dust and the glare would have caused that. He looked about him and laughed, thinking of his classmate, Roger Kane. Went out for archaeology. Long-faced because he couldn't join up with an expedition to dig around Mosul. Hadn't seen Kane for ten years. Cooper laughed at the recollection. Good old Kane!

But why not dig? These Arabs: just maggots burrowing in the carcasses of dead cities. Mound after sun-burned mound rose from the plain. Sun-dried brick disintegrated. They buried glazed tiles, sculptured stone. It was all dead. Dead as anyone doomed to live here for five years.

Dead. But master magicians burrowed into the mounds and made classrooms where they taught beginners in magic. Aspiring wizards came from Hindustan, from Egypt, from El Moghreb to learn the art. Everyone knew that. It was a wonder that the company had not written a clause into the contract, so that employees who studied magic forfeited all salary deposits and transportation back to the States.

That night Cooper followed Hassan into the waste lands, where rubbish mounds marked what once had been Kalah and Asshur and Dar Sharrukin. Jackals howled. Small creatures scurried about and made disturbing little sounds.

Bats whisked past and brushed his cheeks. The smoothness of their bodies made Cooper shiver.

"Where is the place?" he asked, almost whispering.

The scrawny Arab did not answer. There was a moon, low-hanging, but risen high enough to be white rather than red copper. Finally Hassan halted in a shallow bowl among the mounds. Drifted sand and wind-blown brush made the bottom uneven. Here and there masonry cropped up.

"Looks like a well coping," Cooper said, more to himself than to his companion. He began to have misgivings about this inspiration. He was somewhat afraid.

Hassan knelt. He tugged at one of the sand-wedged blocks of stone. "Well coping," he grunted. The block twisted in its bed. "The Well of the Angels, sahib. The hand of Allah sealed the cover, but the hand of man digs in at the side."

He giggled. Cooper wanted to kick him. Then he wondered how anyone so scrawny could have moved so large a rock. It was not pivoted, nor hinged like a door. Cooper echoed, "Well of the Angels?"

"Ay wahl! Harût and Marût. God sent them to earth thirteen thousand years ago to enlighten mankind. Satan the Damned sent two Kashmiri girls to tempt them—"

Hassan rolled his eyes, ecstatically sucked in his breath, and made gestures to indicate the shapeliness of the girls. He kissed the tips of the fingers he then pinched together and went on, "It is well known that the Kashmiris are the wickedest of people. So that in the end Allah cast Harût and Marût into this Well, where they hang by their heels even unto this day. And teach magic to whoever would learn."

Cooper wanted to laugh.

Hassan saw the twist of his face and said, "Sahib, may Heaven stuff my mouth with dust if this be not the true truth." He wriggle into the black slot in the coping. "Do not come until I call. I must find the foothold first."

The last few words Hassan spoke were distorted by the air column imprisoned between the bottom and the cover that concealed the mouth of the well. A rock grated, struck, bounced. Cooper began to count seconds. The sound of striking would tell the depth.

He lost count when a woman sneaked behind him. He looked over his shoulder, startled. At first he could see only the shapeless Arab gown, and the white shawl

that covered her hair. Then he caught the gleam of her eyes, and despite the shadows it seemed to him that she was lovely.

"Do not go," she said. "No man can step out of the circle of destiny, not even by magic. Nor will the Angels of the Pit teach their art to any man without first warning him. *'We are a temptation, what we teach is forbidden, O Man, be not an unbeliever!'*"

Cooper could not answer, though he knew enough Arabic. He merely did not know what he wanted to say. The warning made him shrink back from the black slot. Long ago the solemn words of priests had reached deep into Cooper. But he had never known that any feminine voice could be solemn. This bemused him, and when Hassan called from below he began to wriggle through the slot. He had to go before she persuaded him to stay.

Chest flat against the masonry, hands desperately gripping the edge of the slot, Cooper reached into the darkness with his feet. He groped for a foothold. For an insane moment he shuddered lest the supporting block slip from its fellows and let him drop into the Pit.

At the same time, Cooper looked up at the girl. There was the gleam of pendants at her ears, and a golden collar clasped her throat. He was not certain as to her face, but the curve of her throat told him that she must be beautiful.

Below, Hassan spoke as from a tomb: "Keep close to the wall, sahib. The ledge is just below the slot. Reach down a little."

The girl was saying, "No man can cast off the shackles of destiny save by the sacrifice of life. Am I not warning you that the Angels of the Well will demand a price?"

"Who are you, *ya bint?*" Cooper challenged. He was now half angry, for she had begun to shake him from his purpose. He knew that her half-seen beauty might persuade him, and he was afraid.

"I am Lilu, and who knows what life will be taken?"

"Mine?" He felt better now. He had found the ledge. "I'm not afraid."

"No." Her ear pendants tinkled. There were small silver bells in the darkness of her hair. Lilu's perfume made his pulse run faster; he had not known that there was such a girl in all Mosul. She went on, saying, "Nor mine, O Man! But be sure there is no life you would begrudge."

"Sahib—" Hassan's voice must now

be at the bottom. "We must hurry. See, I strike a light, it is safe."

The whining servant's call reassured Cooper. He went down one step and looked back. He could barely see Lilu. She had spoken. There was no more for her to say.

II.

SHADOWS and yellow splashes danced when Hassan struck a match. For an instant wavering light played on monstrous shapes. It was not certain whether they were sculptured on the lining of the Well or whether they rose from the bottom. They seemed to have great wings, and curled beards; bull bodies, and the solemn faces of men crowned with tall miters. Somehow these made him think of Lilu's warning.

Then Cooper learned the interval of the treads, and he descended. Soon he was beside Hassan, on the dry sand of the bottom. He wanted to laugh. He did not know what made him light-headed. Perhaps some earthly exhalation of the pit. Perhaps the sudden feeling that this was real; that this was not mummery; that the masters of wizardry were in the Well, visibly or invisibly present.

Harût and Marût. Angels hanging by their heels. Allah's punishment. To the Semitic mind, loss of dignity was worse than death. Chills and electric twitchings danced over Cooper's skin. He began to feel the wrath and fury of the Angels. They were imprisoned for all time, whereas he was caged for five years. Would they mock him or would they pity him?

The silence stretched. Cooper began to hear the *tick-tick-tick* of his watch. The Well amplified the sound. Drums were thumping far off. Presently he knew that that was the beat of his pulse. The veins in his temples tugged against the skin. At any moment a blood vessel would burst. His lips were dusty. His mouth was dry. The then half belief which had made him ask Hassan for a master of magic had become certainty. He understood now why neither acolytes nor doorkeeper took him into any shrine.

No man could see the fallen Angels. Though humiliated before Allah, their honor was intact before man.

When this understanding came he heard the voice of the silence, and saw the illumination of the darkness; though these were neither to the ear of

his body nor to his eyes. A blue-white flame throbbled and pulsed and twisted spindle-wise in mid-Pit. It was elemental force, and Cooper began to know why the Arabs said that Allah made Iblis of fire.

The soundless voice said: "O Man, whoever seeks receives. But before learning there is warning. Hear with all your ears, O Man!"

During the pause that followed, a wave of power enveloped Cooper. There were two presences. The force of one amplified the surge of the other as they continued, "He who learns shall have no place in the life to come, for a life is the cost of learning. It is better to believe and fear Allah. Verily, what Allah gives is better than what we give."

This was the warning Lilu had mentioned. Harût and Marût had to warn each pupil. But Cooper flung back his head and laughed in the very presence of the Angels, for a great wisdom had come to him. This could not be evil, since Allah permitted them to practice. The warning was for cowards.

The presences repeated, "What Allah gives is better than what we give."

Cooper's laughter made the well echo. Allah had given him five years in Mosul. Allah had tricked him into the hands of oil sellers who took the blood of men. What could the Angels give that was worse than Allah's gift?

The presences pronounced the third warning: "He who learns shall have no place in the life to come."

Cooper answered, "Anything to get out of this corner of hell and desolation! If I stay I go crazy. If I walk out I am murdered, or I starve on the beach! What is the magic?"

Two voices now sounded like trumpets, red and triumphant: "O Man! Three times we have warned, as the law commands, the law of God and Men and Jinn and Angels! Go, for it has been given to you!"

The trumpeting ceased. There was no light in the well. When Cooper's ears ceased rumbling he heard Hassan whimpering. The Arab threshed and groveled on the bottom. He was praying. He called on Allah and on the Christian God.

"Get up, you fool!" Cooper kicked at the sound.

He had new strength. It was like being drunk without being dizzy. It was the strength of fury without the pain of wrath. It was like having the power to fly, yet holding it in restraint. That easy kick lifted the scrawny Arab,

piled him in a heap on the steps; a dirty, whitish blotch, for somehow Cooper's eyes were now accustomed to the gloom.

He struck a match. There was nothing but circular wall, laid centuries ago. Some of the pieces were sculptured, the archaic plunder of an even older ruin. Men with curled beards cut square. Women wearing tall miters. One rode a lion. Another drove a chariot drawn by doves. A man hurled thunderbolts. But all this was in half relief. The carved monsters he had seen on the the way down must have been illusion.

Cooper seized Hassan by the scruff of the neck and hustled up the treacherous stairway. When they were once more among the rubbish mounds, he said to the Arab, "What were you whimpering about, you blasted fool? You took me down there without hollering."

Hassan answered, "Sahib, there were terrible sounds. It was never that way. Usually there is an old man who speaks what the unseen Angels tell him to say to his pupils. But the old man was not there."

Cooper considered for a moment. "So it was different this time?"

"Ay, wah! Ay, wah! There were great wings rustling and a great light blinding me and a howling of all howlings, the crying of many simûns."

"Could you understand anything?"

"Neither seeing nor understanding!" Hassan's teeth still chattered. "Sahib, it was not my fault, I did not do anything, it was not my fault."

Cooper laughed at the moon. As if that scrawny Arab could have added to or taken from those prodigious things in the Well! Instead of the mumbling of some half crazed and self-styled adept of Babylonian magic, the ancient tradition had verified itself in elemental sound and fire. Cooper knew that his escape from Mosul was assured.

He was not impatient. Magic was primarily a matter of purposeful and directed willing rather than incantation and gesture. It was too late now to do any intent willing, and he was a little too shaken for that. Tomorrow, in the cool of the evening. Now that he knew that he could get away, he was patient enough. It might take a few weeks, even, perhaps a month or two or three, for the Bagdad office or New York headquarters to feel the prodding of that power won in the Well of Angels.

The sand and rubbish were air under

Cooper's feet. Hassan had difficulty in keeping up with his master. Cooper was saying to himself, "A promotion and a transfer. Take a bit of time; nothing is done in a finger snap. Damn lonesome, this place."

He sighed gustily. Lonesome, all right. What had happened to Lilu? Wonder if the fury and roaring down in the well scared her? From the tilt of her chin she must be a lady, if that word applied to anything living in Mosul. Lilu—funny name — Laylu—lailat—lailatayn—lailtak saidi. What am I thinking of now, saying, "May your night be auspicious!" It all came from layl, which meant night. Funny how ideas link together.

"Lilu—may your night be happy. No, lailtak saidi, that was the way you said it—" He grinned.

Somehow he was not surprised when he found Lilu waiting in the deep archway of his door. But he might have been surprised had he known all the things that Lilu means.

III.

LIFE in Mosul became endurable in spite of the climate. Reports went out promptly. There were fewer errors. Old Man Burleigh wrote from Bagdad: "Best job anyone has made of a difficult post—slated for promotion when your term is up—home office will be gratified—"

Cooper grinned. That was what Burleigh thought, huh? Three years, five months and eleven days more of this h-l'l's hole. Burleigh would look and feel foolish when a man stepped out of the circle of his destiny, kicked loose the shackles of kismet, and made the company like it. Even the high officials were slaves of that monster. It kicked them around, crushed the life out of them. The company would dissolve in a puff of smoke when Babylonian magic blocked its march and forced it into a new path.

All Mosul had, of course, heard of Lilu. Graybeards wagged. Veiled women chattered. Half the town muttered disapprovingly. The other half said, "She is a stranger and an infidel, even if she does speak the speech of true believers."

Then Cooper heard that an infidel dog had come to Mosul to dig in one of the mounds. An archaeologist. One of those dung beetles who burrow in the droppings of time. Cooper chuckled

and asked himself, "Wouldn't that fellow's eyes pop behind his horn-rimmed specs if he knew what I know about underground places!"

There was another letter from Mr. Burleigh in Bagdad. His health was none too good. Possibly Cooper could take his place if a sick leave was permitted. He took the letter home to think about it. Lilu, sitting a respectful distance apart as he ate his pilau and sheesh kebab and cucumbers and cakes of bread, wondered about his sudden frown.

"What is it, sahib?" Lilu's anklets tinkled as she hurried toward the table. Possibly too much saffron in the gravy. And it was difficult to get good pine nuts. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing," he answered, and scooped up some more rice.

Cooper was thinking of that warning: magic could be learned only at the cost of a life. Burleigh was a pleasant fellow behind that grim front. The failure of his health—who had ever expected that man of leather and iron to weaken? Cooper thrust aside his chair. He was sick from the sudden certainty of being responsible for Burleigh's illness.

Harassed, red-eyed, sunken-cheeked, sallow. A month ago he had laughed bitterly at the thought of being responsible for any man's death, much less worried thereby. Yet this new Cooper was bound by every thought and act of that half-mad fellow who had shattered glasses to lie in the way of a native's bare feet.

He gulped, swallowed his stomach and his fear. In a moment he went on eating. Lilu was an exquisite creature, and he did not want to hurt her feelings by refusing her food. A strange girl. She pretended that she had not spoken to him at the Well of the Angels. That she had gone there, being desolate in a strange city, to pray for help or an easy death.

"I escaped from a slave trader," she would say. "All my people were free. Of course, sahib, in the mountains. A voice sent me to your house."

She was no Arab. Lilu was taller, and she had blue eyes; the color the natives ascribed to infidels and wizards and witches, though common enough among the Kurds.

"You did know of the Well?"

"Who does not, sahib? But it was a night-prowling spirit that warned you, and not I."

That was her story, and he did not

see any need of arguing. And rather than sit there drinking coffee while Lulu plucked an eight-stringed oudh and sang "Zabiyat," Cooper went out. He did not want to think too much of Mr. Burleigh. He wanted to find some way out of the maze that had hemmed him in ever since Harût and Marût had spoken in the Pit. But he feared that there was no way out.

He wanted to talk to a white man. An American, that is. There were few Europeans in Mosul, but they did not count. A coffee-house loafer guided him to the archaeologist's camp, which was well outside the limits of Mosul.

Men were beating a drum and chanting a bawdy song. There was the smoke of burning brush and dry dung. Then Cooper saw the glow among the mounds and the shapes of khaki tents. He gave his guide a rupee and went on toward the fire.

Dogs yapped, came toward him, snarling. "Hi, there!" he yelled, then cursed the animals in Arabic.

The tall man at the fire leaped to his feet at the sound of an American voice. He stood there, curved pipe in his hand, chin outthrust, as he squinted into the gloom.

Cooper said: "I'll be damned! Kane! So you made it to Mosul to dig. They didn't tell me your name."

Roger Kane caught his friend's hand. "Last I heard of you, you were in Oklahoma. Say, Iraq's done well by you. You look fine, fellow!"

"Considering this damn climate, I feel fine, too."

Kane called for fresh coffee. There were cigars, carefully sealed against the desert dryness. Cooper refused the camp chair and squatted in the sand. Funny how an American voice made the Well of the Angels seem improbable. But it was odd, Burleigh's sudden illness.

Finally he said, "Looking for anything in particular. Or just gambling? When'd you leave New York?"

"You bet, I'm looking for something specific, which is what I guess you mean," Kane answered. "In this business you don't just dig at random, or throw a tomato can out of your tent and dig where it drops. It's a science today."

"You mean enlightened guesswork. Not entirely science."

Kane nodded. "Naturally, there is some uncertainty. Just as there is in oil drilling. Though much less than there was a dozen or twenty years ago."

"I wouldn't know." Cooper's laugh was grim. "I've held down a desk job ever since we left school, except for two years in the field. Executive, hell! But it's not so bad. Well—what *are* you looking for?"

"A temple tower. The oldest temple site in all this country!" Kane sat up and leaned forward; enthusiasm animated him. "The place was a ruin when Dar Sharrukin was founded. We've just translated inscriptions that tell of what was a tradition in those days."

Cooper was impressed in spite of himself. Here was a man tracing a site that was legendary when some scribe had made wedge-shaped marks on a clay tablet perhaps five thousand years ago.

"Temple tower?"

"Sure." Kane brought his hands closer together as he raised them, edgewise and palms inward. "Ziggurat. Terraced tower. Like those Mexican pyramids, only steeper. Like the Tower of Babel must have been." His eyes gleamed, his voice rang as he went on. "Not far from here is the place where they built that tower. The plain of Babil, the confusion of tongues. Think of it, fellow! Here, right here, five thousand, six thousand years ago, a man tried to outwit God and fate."

He stopped short. "Sorry—I always rattle when I get going. Can't talk to Arabs. They think I'm crazy, of course."

"Listen." Cooper frowned. "Do you think there was an actual Tower of Babel? That some day you'll find the ruins of it?"

Kane stroked his chin, shook his head slowly. "No, I don't. I think it's a legend based on a mighty fool's attempt to kick loose from fate. Like Gilgamesh and his quest for immortality. Or else it warns against the folly of trying to step clear of the . . . of the fence that destiny puts around us. I think—"

He started, amazed at the succession of changes in Cooper's expression. Cooper demanded, "When did you get this job?"

"Why?" Kane frowned. Something was wrong with Cooper! "What do you mean, 'get this job'?"

Cooper could not explain the fear that had closed in bit by bit during Kane's remarks. It alarmed him, hearing a man just from the States saying, "*fool's attempt to kick loose from fate*—warns against—trying to step clear of destiny—"

Cooper stuttered, "When did you first learn of this place to dig?"

Kane answered, "Professor Hardy and I were at work on the ninth of August. One of our richest alumni just happened to drop in a moment after we finished a

translation of some tablets dug up years ago. I never saw a man so moved. He'd never had any interest in archaeology, but in a flash he'd financed us. A hundred thousand dollars! Hardy, poor old fellow, couldn't stand the climate. So I came out alone."

Cooper lurched to his feet. "I must have eaten something tonight. Damn cucumbers. See you tomorrow."

And as he stumbled through the gloom he began to make allowance for the time difference between New York and Mosul. The calculation shocked him. A millionaire backer had financed Kane on the very day and hour when he, Cooper, had for the third time declined the warning of the Angels.

But when he finally neared Mosul the fear lifted from him. Cooper argued, "Coincidence. Suppose I'd thought otherwise down there in the Pit. Kane'd still have translated the inscription. Or his friend the professor would have. If not that night, then later. And if not that backer, then someone else."

He felt better now that he had clearly severed Kane's good fortune from that bargain in the Well. After all, it was not remarkable that Kane, speaking of the Tower of Babel, should use terms referring to man's attempt to break the shackles of destiny.

IV.

In the several weeks that followed, Cooper and Kane rebuilt that close friendship which years had almost buried. The oil exile began to find a certain fascination in despised Mosul. He would ride out of an afternoon, when the reports were in the mail to Baedat, and watch Kane's crew of Arabs. They were digging into the mound that archaeological science picked out from the other rubbish heaps which dotted the burned, brown plain.

Bronzed men, stripped down to loin cloth and turban, gleamed with sweat. Baskets of earth passed from hand to hand, down the long line. The first man chanted, "A basket, O brother, a basket!"

The next, swaying in time, would sing, "A basket, by Allah, a basket!"

And the last man, finally, droned at the dumped, "Yea, by God, a basket!"

More song than motion, more motion than work; but slowly the mound was wearing down. Brown men like these had built Babylon and Nineveh and Kalah and Asshur. These called themselves Arabs, but who knew what blood was in them?

One day Cooper saw a squad of Iraqi soldiers lounging in a shed thatched with palm leaves. "Why the army?" he asked Kane, who patiently waited for the first sign of something that had not perished from time.

"Won't be long now. Every basket of earth will be sifted. Every pottery fragment taken up by hand. A lot of things to be photographed in place. Lots of others reinforced so they won't break when taken up."

"That still doesn't explain the troops," Cooper said, chuckling.

"You never saw an Arab who believed it was wrong to steal what grows in the ground. There'd be hordes of looters by night. Looking for antikas. It's not just what they'd steal, but what they'd ruin."

That evening Cooper ate at Kane's camp. Good old American canned goods! He had his choice. Peaches. Chili. Beans. Sausages. He thought, "I'm damn well fed up with loobiya, hhumus-bi-tahhini, Daoud Basha, and the rest!" There had been a letter that day from Bagdad. As soon as a relief man could come to Mosul, Cooper was to take Mr. Burleigh's place. Such unheard of upsetting of seniority indicated certain and early promotion.

Several considerations made Cooper uncomfortable. He had to settle one, at least. So he drained the juice from his dish of canned peaches, and tried to seem casual when he asked, "Ah . . . um . . . it seemed . . . uh . . . damn funny the way your . . . um . . . millionaire was right on hand the evening you were reading that tablet. The one and only tablet that had a story that could knock him loose from his bark roll. Suppose"—Cooper forced a laugh—"you'd not worked that night, or he'd not called? One of you could have dropped dead. If he had, this work might've been delayed a dozen years."

Kane gave Cooper a sharp look. He slowly set his coffee-cup on the folding table and sat up straight. "Do you know, that was the most uncanny thing. I'd have mentioned it to you, but I thought it'd sound—well, silly—if you get what I mean—as if I believed some curious tailor-made bit of fate had elected me."

Cooper noted the sudden thumping of his pulse. A tightness of his throat. He already knew all but the details. "What?" he croaked.

"Oh, all right," Kane agreed after a moment of hesitation. "There was a fire half an hour later. Clay tablets didn't have a chance. What the firemen didn't break, the water destroyed."

Cooper frowned. "You had your notes or you couldn't be digging here."

Kane raised his hand. "They were burned. I'm going pretty much on memory, deduction, general knowledge. All we had was the man's check. We couldn't ever have gotten anyone else to back us."

"Well, you had him."

Kane still had his queer, puzzled look. "That's the fantastic quirk. He could have changed his mind, you know. We were afraid that he would. That sudden flare of enthusiasm didn't seem natural. Hardy and I sat up all night when we weren't pacing the floor. That fire, you know. How would our man feel when we told him that we couldn't go over the evidence again? When we had nothing left to fan his enthusiasm again?"

"We had the check, but you can imagine how much chance we had of keeping it against his will. Two school-teachers. We'd not dare offend a prominent alumnus or take advantage of his momentary lack of judgment, if he saw fit to call it that."

"Well—you're here. It worked out."

"He died that night, without ever knowing of the fire. Heart failure. He'd recruited some football talent, and settling some matter of eligibility proved too much for him. So I am here, and everyone still wonders how a rumor ever got us this fund! Crazy, don't you see, a fellow with athletics on the brain dishing out for archaeology!"

Cooper felt as though he had been clubbed over the head. His release from Mosul was too closely tied to Kane's arrival. The linkage frightened Cooper. It was diabolical as Burleigh's sudden failure of health. He, Cooper, had won a way of kicking off the shackles of kismet, and he was frightened.

Something evil lurked over him. He could feel it.

But he did not know how certain this was until he said to Lili, "Tomorrow we go to Bagdad. Tomorrow, and this is the last of Mosul."

Now that liberation was near enough at hand for him to name a day and an hour, he knew that only hope that made him see any day-to-day good in that dingy town, that tangle of mean bazaars sweltering under a nitiless sun. It was not until Lili spoke that he knew how he hated Mosul, how he had hated it every day since that night at the Well; how his seeming tolerance had only been an expression of triumph over fate.

Lili said, "I cannot leave Mosul."

He stared at her. "What?"

The moon had risen just high enough to clear the parapet of the housetop. At the farther end was a narrow bar of light that slowly widened. Lili was a vague, lovely shape in the luminous shadows of the corner.

"I cannot leave Mosul!" She swayed toward him caught his shoulders, and cried, "Do not leave me here! Not alone! Do not leave me buried in the sand and the deadness."

This plea was beyond understanding. Lili's tears were warm on his hands when he gently thrust her from him and said, "Here, here, don't cut up like that! Now, why can't you go?"

"Because I can't. I lied to you. I was sent to you. By Harūt and Marūt. I'm not a human woman. I am one of those who walk by night. One of the lilin."

Bit by bit he understood. She was one of the spirits of the night, like Lilith, who had loved Adam. And Lilith's kin had loved mankind ever since. She was bound to Mosul, one of those assigned to that locality. The Angels of the Pit had given her a form substantial enough to endure daylight. They had sent her to keep him company while he waited to take the first step out of the circle of destiny. But when he made that step he would have to leave her. She would once more be a shadow that haunted ruins and waste places, a fleeting, lovely thing that became vaporous and vanished with sunrise.

There was no way out of it. Lili sadly said, "If you go to Bagdad, I will not see you again. All the day life I have won will be lost, and I will cry among the mounds, cry with the owls and the jackals, and the Arabs will make signs and take refuge with Allah when they hear me."

He said, "And if I stay, I'll go crazy in this house-bound town. I've lived on the hope of leaving. But I can't leave, not without you."

He meant that. The loveliness of Lili had grown on him. She was unlike any woman he had ever known or fancied. Least of all was she like any native woman. These were either very young, very lovely and very stupid; or else shapeless, shrill-voiced, dirty, and offensive to eye and heart. The Kurdish girls of the mountain tribes—Lili might be one of those, though that was not quite plausible.

Cooper began to understand what the

Angels had meant when they warned him against shattering the shackles of destiny. He would leave, and he would live, yet much of him would be dead from having abandoned Lilu. If her incredible sayings were true—his gradual acceptance of wonders had finally left him without any power to doubt—then her life, half human and half spirit, was the price the Angels exacted.

The studied malignity of Harût and Marût gnawed deeper and deeper into him. They had read his heart and his thought, and since there had been no life which meant more to Cooper than his own fever and brandy-twisted wretchedness, they had given Lilu the loan of humanity and sent her to him.

Ages ago two Kashmiri girls had taught Harût and Marût such depravities and wickedness that Allah had hung the Angels in the Well of Babil. And now they took their vengeance on mankind by teaching deadly magic to each discontented one whose lack of fortitude made him attempt to shatter the shackles of fate. Cooper now knew what the Moslems meant when they said "Mak-tub." He knew now the futility of trying to erase or alter what was written.

Cooper paced up and down the flat housetop. "They warned me," he said aloud and bitterly. "They warned me three times. God does not allow any evil except when a man insists upon having it; that's what the Koran says. And I insisted."

Lilu said, "Ay wah, sahib! And they knew that you would insist."

That whipped Cooper's fury to a cold flame. He halted, stood there a moment, then turned sharply toward the stairs.

"Where are you going?" Lilu asked.

"To curse the Angels," he answered.

"Or to bargain with them."

And this time he needed no guide to the Well.

V.

The descent into the Pit was easy as walking down the broad stairway of the Grand Central Station. Cooper was not alarmed at the facility won by repetition. His fury left him no time for thought. He stood there, waiting for the spirit fire to flame and whirl, and the voice of the silence to ring and trumpet.

His wrath left him empty of fear or awe. When the moments dragged and there was no sound and no thinning of the darkness, he cursed the Angels and

the emptiness. First his voice was shrill, then it cracked, then it became hoarse and he could shape no more words. They burned in his mind, even though the echoes ceased mocking him.

The Angels ignored him. He shook his fists at the blackness. He challenged them to come and destroy him. He beat and kicked the sculptured wall of the Well. Finally he cursed Allah, who permitted Harût and Marût's treacherous candor to trick harassed people.

There was no answer.

His rage made him dizzy. He fell to the sandy floor. For a long time he was without sense or feeling. When at last he began to feel the bitter cold of the dry Well, Cooper was too weary to move. He was not even sure that he had strength to come out of the Pit. He remembered dimly how someone had said that rage distilled a strong stimulant and a strong poison into the blood. This seemed true. The power had gone, and the venom had filtered through him.

It was then that he heard the voice—not splendid and pealing, but small and fine—a far-off silver whisper. "O Man, we learn the will and the soul of a man by the voice of his wrath, and since there is no fear in you it will be easy to do what there is to be done concerning Lilu."

Cooper brushed the sand from his face and straightened up. He knelt and cocked his head a little. The sound was finer than any gnat's piping, yet each word cleanly shaped; still, its source was uncertain, and it seemed to move, so that there was always danger of missing what followed:

"Go to where the dung beetle digs in the droppings of time, yes, even to what is left of the ziggurat that was old when the first wall was laid about Dar Sharrukin."

Cooper again noticed the cold and became tense. The two Angels, piping as from some remote corner of space, referred to Kane's excavation. This made him apprehensive. For a moment he could not understand them. He heard small twitterings, like the jibber of bats and the squeak of mice. The intentness of his listening became painful. It seemed that he was missing important counsel.

Then he knew that the Angels had been consulting with each other, for suddenly he could hear direct address. One said, "Go and dig and get that silver image whose face and figure are

Lilu's, and take it always with you." The other piped, antiphonally, "For she is the counterpart thereof, and where it goes she also may go, in any circle within a day's march." Then the first voice: "Yea, did we not bring one to dig so that there would be little for you to lift?" And both piped together: "O Man, well do we know the will and soul of a man by the voice of his wrath, and we reward him according to the stature of his soul. The girl is your fate, and have we not delivered her fate into your two hands?"

Suddenly Cooper knew that the Angels had no more to say. They had drawn back into the silence from which they had come. They had given him another lesson in magic, he realized as he ascended to the surface. For it was now plain that so long as the will and the soul of a man are strong, a way is opened.

Head high, he looked into the moon and laughed. He said aloud to the waste lands and the shifting light and shadows, "They knew I'd not leave her here. Tough about Burleigh, but when did he ever give me a chance?"

Now that he had faced the loss of Lilu, it seemed very small, this matter of whether or not he killed Burleigh by demanding escape from Mosul. When a man dares to curse the gods and Angels, a power grows in him, and he cannot quench it, nor does he want to.

Cooper went back to his house. He got his flashlight. He did not need any implements. The Arabs would have left enough tools in the excavation. But the heavy knife that Lilu used to mince mutton and eggplant would be handy for silent digging. One could crouch and ply the blade, where one would have to stand to use a shovel. Also, a one-handed implement left the other free to hold a light. He remembered all this at the door and went back for the knife.

When he walked down the narrow streets of the town he was troubled by the thought of robbing Roger Kane. It was not that Kane's one-hundred-thousand-dollar endowment and an Iraqi government permit gave him any exclusive moral right to what had been buried long before the foundations of Dar Sharrukin were laid. Indeed, Cooper knew from the first that his own right was greater. Two Angels had sent Lilu to him, and the silver image that governed her circle of material existence

surely was part of her strange being. And the government could not give a woman's life to an archaeologist. That was plain.

There was much about Babylonian magic that he did not know, not even intuitively, but it was certain that he had a right to the silvery symbol, which perhaps was a focal point of the forces which let Lilu materialize. Yet he was uneasy. He felt that instead of slipping into the excavation by stealth he should go openly and manfully and ask Roger Kane for that small gift.

However, he knew that Kane would not grant it to him. Kane had curious scruples. He worshiped abstractions such as science and learning. This mission in Babil was sacred. One could no more hope to bribe or browbeat or beg him from his purpose than one could have deflected Peter the Hermit from the crusade he preached.

"If he doesn't know, he's not hurt," Cooper argued. "If I told him Lilu's existence depended on it, he'd think I was crazy. Maybe I am crazy, too, but look at how mad facts can be. Even if he believed me, he could not ethically give away any of his find. It belongs to a university, to be labeled with a dead man's name. He'd be sorry, awfully sorry; he'd be between two fires, and he'd say 'no.' That would always be between us."

So, since he was keeping Kane from being troubled by an evil choice, Cooper felt better about it all. Stealthily he crept toward the sleeping camp. At least one of the soldiers must be on post, but Iraqi Arabs were no more addicted to insomnia than any other kind. Particularly when there was no officer to have them jailed or flogged for sleeping on duty.

Moonlight made the task more difficult. If he waited, the Arabs would uncover the statuette, and under Kane's keen eye. It was uncanny how these things were timed. A man had come from America, had hired scores of laborers, had dug away uncounted tons of rubbish so that one man could in a few minutes dig up a silver image not much longer than his hand. But as he wormed his way through the shadows, just past Kane's tent, Cooper stopped. His breath was failing. Something tightened his throat. Electric twitchings tickled his skin, played at the base of his skull.

The awesome picture of how one man's fate is linked with the fate of

men far off and unknown disturbed Cooper. He was almost afraid of what he was about to do—shatter the shackles of fate, take Lilu by the hand and lead her with him through this cleft he had made in the circle of his destiny. And seeing at once all the things that had led to this moment, all the acts and thoughts of men divided by miles and years, he knew how awful it is to tamper with the links of destiny.

Then Cooper hardened his heart and he moved past the sentry who crouched on the edge of the Pit. The fellow snored, of course. His rifle lay beside him. It was barely visible in the blotch of shadow that concealed him. And Kane, Cooper knew from passing the tent, was sound asleep. A cot creaked, and a breathing that carried clear in the silence had made that certain.

Cooper's instructions grew in detail as he approached the designated corner of the pit. That was a peculiar aspect of the magic that Harût and Marût taught. Magic was logical. It was merely a matter of being in tune with the breath and pulse of the world; and all things of creation were not only revealed, but also subjected to the magician. Ritual and incantation did not seem to enter at all. And this being in tune, Cooper now realized, would never leave him; no matter where he went, his wisdom would also go.

Here, where the Arabs had exposed archaic sun-dried brick, where granite from the far-off hills shaped a pediment, gleaming smooth in the blue-black shadows; where part of a tiled wall had resisted the shock of conquest and centuries; this was the frieze of parading archers the Angels had described. Cooper knelt and plied the heavy knife for perhaps three minutes, silently and without any misgivings. He did not even need the flashlight beam. His fingers now had vision, he had strange new senses he could not name, and these were all concentrated on the hidden statuette.

Wonder shook him. In his thoughts he said, "I see it already. I hear it speaking to me. I smell Lilu's perfume. I touch the smooth silver and I touch Lilu also. I taste the clean silver." This was amazing, this uncanny concentration of every sense, but most baffling was that addition of new senses. He could also perceive things with respect to their places in time itself. At once he saw this spot when man for the first time erected a building on it; when bearded men

called it Dar Sharrukin; when mitered priests put a silver statuette into a crypt so that not even time could destroy the foundations. Also, he was looking as far into the future. When a man breaks the shackles of fate, the present and past and future become one!

Now that he had the statuette in his hands, he could not quite separate his identity with that of the priests. He was not sure whether he was removing it or putting it into the crypt. Whether the men about were helping or hindering him. It was not until a yell shattered the complex time web that Cooper knew what had happened.

His uncannily certain digging had undermined some loose bricks. They slid noisily down a slope and made a stack of tiles clatter. The sentry started, yelled, then fired a shot. The bullet went wide of its mark, of course, Cooper snatched his prize and scrambled up the slope. His flashlight clattered down grade, falling from his pocket.

Cooper was not afraid. He knew that he could not be captured. A soldier, half asleep, came empty-handed to head him off. They crashed, rolled down the outer slope. Cooper was the first to recover. He jabbed sharply with his knee, and the soldier was knocked breathless.

But the escape was hampered. A flashlight blazed, blinding Cooper as he wriggled clear of his gasping opponent. Just a dazzling flicker, scarcely long enough to identify him, but enough to leave his eyes quite useless for an instant. Right when split seconds counted, Cooper was virtually in blackness darker than the Well of the Angels. His head whirled from the shock of landing, and the cries of the aroused camp seemed to come from every direction at once. The super senses so lavishly and needlessly crowded into the digging were now wholly lacking; or what remained of them was only enough to be confusing.

He still had a chance, but he could not regain the all-knowing and all-seeing power of the Pit. A man's hands closed on his threshing legs. Another yelled and snatched at the silver statuette. That was when Cooper thrust with the heavy knife.

The man cried out and let go. Cooper kicked free from the other one. He gained his feet. He could now see. He had a clear start. Then he recognized the man he had stabbed. It was all very plain in the beam of the flashlight that lay

on the ground. Even moonlight would have sufficed.

Cooper was already running, swiftly, stretching long legs. Arabs howled, "He has slain the sahib! Beware!" Others cursed, and two fired crazily at the man who raced easily in and out among the mounds. In a few seconds they could no longer see him, though they continued firing and yelling instead of pursuing.

It was quite true. Cooper had in that one instant of human panic lost control. For an instant his magic had failed. He had blindly stabbed, and his friend was dead. Cooper knew that Kane must be dead. He knew that this was the life that the Angels had demanded.

He knew also that no pursuit could overtake him, so he walked slowly among the mounds and tamarisk of the plain of Babil; and the moon rose white and high while he walked.

He said, over and over, "This proves that I am outside the circle of destiny. I have broken the shackles of fate. It was once said that a king is next to God, and I am more powerful than any king ever was. From now on the Angels of the Well will serve in everything."

The knife? There were dozens like it in Mosul. The flashlight? Presumably one of Kane's. Footprints? The police force of Mosul was sketchy. Moreover, a full-fledged magician with two Angels to serve him was exempt from law. Cooper no longer believed this, he knew it; a calm, certain knowledge.

This knowledge was so solemn that he halted not far from the Well, toward which he had been walking all that while. Harût and Marût had, in their malice, planned this from the first, and he had blindly demanded their gift. He began to think of how he and Kane had gone to school. How good that friendship must have been to have endured and become ripe and rich about a campfire in Mosul.

This was plainly not a matter for remorse. Remorse, was for the survivor whose recklessness had caused a fatal auto crash; for the hunter who had pointed an "unloaded" gun at a comrade; for one who had cursed his parents or struck a child. But a man who had stepped out of the circle of destiny could not say, "I did not know."

He stood there, and without trying to speak those words. He could not have spoken them if he had tried. He

did not want their futility in his ears and mouth. Finally he remembered that he had gone for a silver statuette, and that it was in his hand; in the one that was not stained with a friend's blood.

He looked at the little image. He looked beyond it, in time and space, and saw it in more than Lîlu's face and figure. Now that he had paid the price, he knew fully what it meant to break the shackles of kismet. He could follow any act to its remote origins, a million years ago, and trace its every root and source. He could follow every act to its uttermost consequence.

Thus he halted at the entrance of the Well instead of going down into it to curse God and the Angels. Knowing the immensity of the thing he had learned to do, he could not revile them for the price they had taken. Yet Lîlu was not worth a friend's life, so he set the image near the coping, where drifting sand would soon bury it. Then Cooper walked westward, away from the broad Tigris, and away from Mosul.

Soon the sun would rise behind him and blaze against his bare head. He would feel this only for a few minutes. Perhaps he would not feel it at all. For inside his head there was now a vast whirling flame. While there was no salvation for a fool who tries to change the pattern of the web, Cooper knew that there was merit in declining the harvest of folly. He did not any longer want to escape. And he knew equally that it was folly to blame the Angels. They, too, were paying the cost of broken kismet.

So he walked, knowing that not long after sunrise he would leave his body in the sands west of Mosul. Possibly he would meet Kane somewhere on the march. Good old Kane; he'd not be resentful.

Cooper did not hear the Angels sighing in the Well. He did not hear Harût say to Marût, "We should have told him that the soldiers had been plotting to murder Kane for his canned goods and then to desert and become bandits in the Sinjar Hills. In another few days they would have gotten up their courage." He did not hear Marût answer, "That would not have changed the issue, for a man does what he will do."

Then there was silence in the Well, for the two Angels were sad. They were thinking of the day when they had been warned against the wiles of two Kashmiri girls sent by Satan the Damned—

THE PIPES OF PAN

By LESTER del REY

*If a god is a god only so long as he has worshippers,
and Pan was forced to seek employment—*

BEYOND the woods on either side were well kept fields and fertile farm land, but here the undergrowth ran down to the dirt road and hid the small plot of tilled ground, already overrun with weeds. Behind that, concealed by thicker scrub timber lay a rude log house. Only the trees around, that had sheltered it from the heavy winds, had kept it from crumbling long before.

Pan recognized the lazy retreat to nature that had replaced his strong worship of old. He moved carefully through the tangled growth that made way for him, his cloven hoofs clicking sharply on the stones. It was a thin and saddened god that approached the house and gazed in through a hole that served as a window.

Inside, Fred Emmet lay on a rude pallet on the floor, a bag of his possessions beside him. Across from him was a stone fireplace, and between the two, nothing. A weak hand moved listlessly, brushing aside the vermin that knew his sickness; perhaps they sensed that the man was dying, and their time was short. He gave up and reached for a broken crock that contained water, but the effort was too great.

"Pan!" The man's voice reached out, and the god stepped away from the window and through the warped doorway. He moved to the pallet and leaned over his follower. The man looked up.

"Pan!" Emmet's words were startled, but there was a reverent note in his labored voice, though another might have mistaken the god for a devil. The tangled locks of Pan's head were separated by two goat horns and the thin sharp face ended in a ragged beard that seemed the worse for the weather. Then the neck led down to a bronzed torso that might have graced Hercules, only to end in the hips and legs of a goat, covered with shaggy hair. Horror and comedy mingled grotesquely, except for the eyes, which were deep and old, filled now with pity.

Pan nodded. "You've been calling me, Frank Emmet, and it's a poor god that wouldn't answer the appeal of his last worshiper. All the others of your kind

have deserted me for newer gods, and only you are left, now."

It was true enough. Over the years, Pan had seen his followers fall off and dwindle until his great body grew lean and his lordly capering among the hills became a slow march toward extinction. Now even this man was dying. He lifted the tired head and held the crock of water to Emmet's mouth.

"Thanks!" The man mulled it over slowly. "So when I'm gone, there's no others. If I'd 'a' known, Pan, I might have raised up kids to honor your name, but I thought there were others. Am I—"

"Dying," the god answered. The blunt truth was easier than half-believed lies.

"Then take me outside, where the sun can shine on me."

Pan nodded and lifted him easily, bearing him out as gently as a mother might her child, but a spasm of pain shot over the man's face as Pan laid him down. The time was almost up, the god knew. From a pocket in his tattered loincloth he drew out a small syrinx, or pipe of seven reeds, and blew softly across it. A bird heard the low murmuring melody and improvised a harmony, while a cricket marked time in slow chirps.

Emmet's face relaxed slowly and one of his hands came out to lie on the hairy thigh. "Thanks, Pan. You've always been a good god to me, and I'm hoping you'll have good I—" The voice trailed away and disappeared into the melody of the syrinx. Pan rose slowly, drawing a last lingering note from it, dropped the arm over the still chest and closed the eyes. Nearby was a rusty spade, and the earth was soft and moist.

Pan's great shoulders drooped as he wiped the last of the earth from his hands. Experimentally, he chirped at the cricket, but there was no response, and he knew that the law governing all gods still applied. When the last of their worshipers were gone, they either died or were forced to eke out their living in the world of men by some human activity. Now there would be hunger to satisfy, and in satisfying it, other needs of a life among men would present themselves.

Apollo was gone, long since, choosing in his pride to die, and the other gods had followed slowly, some choosing work, some death. But they had at least the advantage of human forms, while he knew himself for a monster his own mother had fled from. But then, the modern clothes were more concealing than the ancient ones.

Inside the house he found Emmet's other clothes, more or less presentable, and a hunting knife and soap. Men were partial to their own appearance, and horns were a stigma among them. Reluctantly, he brought the knife up against the base of one, cutting through it. Pain lanced through him at first, but enough of his god-head remained to make the stumps heal over almost instantly. Then the other one, followed by the long locks of his hair. He combed it out and hacked it into such form as he could.

As the beard came away he muttered ungodly phrases at the knife that took off skin with the hair. But even to his own eyes, the smooth-shaven face was less forbidding. The lips, as revealed, were firm and straight, and the chin was good, though a mark of different color showed where the beard had been.

He fingered his tail thoughtfully, touching it with the blade of the knife, then let it go; clothes could hide it, and Pan had no love for the barren spine that men regarded as a mark of superiority. The tail must stay. Shoes were another problem, but he solved it by carving wooden feet to fit them, and making holes for his hoofs. By lacing them on firmly, he found half an hour's practice enough to teach him to walk. The underclothes, that scratched against the hair on his thighs and itched savagely, were another factor he had no love for, but time might improve that.

Hobbling about in the rough walk his strange legs necessitated, he came on a few pieces of silver in another broken crock and pocketed them. From the scraps of conversation he had heard, work was hard enough for men to find, and he might need this small sum before he found occupation. Already hunger was creeping over him, or he guessed it was hunger. At least the vacuum in his stomach was as abhorrent to him as to nature. Heretofore, he had supped lightly on milk and honey as the moon suited him, but this was a man-sized craving.

Well, if work he must, work he would. The others had come to it, such as still lived. Ishtar, or Aphrodite, was working

somewhere in the East as a nursemaid, though her old taste for men still cost her jobs as fast as she gained them. Pan's father, Hermes, had been working as a Postal Telegraph boy the last he'd seen of him. Even Zeus, proudest of all, was doing an electrician's work somewhere, leaving only Ares still thriving in full god-head. What his own talents might be, time alone would tell, but the rippling muscles of his body must be put to some good usage.

Satisfied that there was no more he could do, he trotted out and plowed his way through the underbrush that failed to make way for him as it should have. He jingled the money in one pocket thoughtfully as he hit the road, then drew out the syrinx and began a reedy tune of defiance on it. Work there must be, and he'd find it.

It was less than half an hour later, but the god's feet were already aching in the tight boxes he had made for them, and his legs threatened to buckle under the effort it took to ape man's walk. He moved past the ugly square house and toward the barn where the farmer was unhitching his team.

"Handout or work?" The man's voice was anything but enthusiastic.

"I'm looking for work."

"Uh-huh. Well, you do look strong enough. Living near the city the way I do, I get a lot of fellows in here, figuring they can always work in the country. But their arms wouldn't make toothpicks for a jaybird. Know anything about farming?"

"Something." It was more in Demeter's line, but he knew something about everything that grew. "I'm not asking more than room and board and a little on the side."

The farmer's eyes were appraising. "You do look as if you'd seen fresh air, at that. And you're homely enough to be honest. Grab a-holt here, and we'll talk it over. I don't rightly need a man, but—Hey! Whoa, there!"

Pan cursed silently. His god-head was still clinging to him, and the horses sensed the urge to wildness that was so intimately a part of him. As his hands fell on the tugs, they reared and bucked, lunging against their collars. He caught at the lines to steady them, but they flattered back their ears and whinnied wildly. That was enough; Pan moved back and let the farmer quiet them.

"Afraid I can't use you." The words were slow and decisive. "I use a right

smart amount of horseflesh here, and some people just don't have the knack with them; animals are funny that way—temperamental, you might call it. Easy, there, Nelly. Tried any other places?"

"All the other farms along the road; they're not hiring hands."

"Hm-m-m. Wouldn't be, of course. Bunch of city men. Think they can come out and live in the country and do a little farming on the side. If I had the money, I'd sell out and move somewhere where people knew what the earth was made for. You won't find any work around here." He slapped a horse on the withers and watched as it stretched out and rolled in the short grass. "Stay for lunch?"

"No." He wasn't hungry enough to need food yet, and the delay might cost him a job elsewhere. "Any sheepherding done around here?" As the god of the shepherds, it should come natural to him, and it was work that would be more pleasant than the tight closeness of the city.

"Not around here. Out West they have, but the Mexicans do all that. If you're a sheep man, though, that's why the horses didn't take to you; they hate the smell of sheep."

Again the limitations of a human life imposed themselves; instead of transporting himself to the sheepherding country in a night, he'd have to walk there slowly, or ride. "How much would it cost to go out West?"

"Blamed if I know. Seventy dollars, maybe more."

So that was out. It would have to be the city, after all, where the fetid stench of close-packed humans tainted the air, and their meaningless yammering beat incessantly in one's ears. "I guess I'll have to go on into town," he said ruefully.

"Might be best. Nowadays, the country ain't what it used to be. Every fool that fails in town thinks he can fall back on the country, and every boy we have that amounts to anything goes to the city. Machinery's cutting down the number of men we need, and prices are shot haywire, even when a mortgage doesn't eat up all we make. You traveling on Shank's Mare?"

Pan nodded, and the other studied him again. "Uh-huh. Well, down the road a piece you'll see a brick house set way back from the road. Go in there and tell Hank Sherman I said you was a friend of mine. He's going into the city, and you might as well ride. Better hurry, though."

Pan made his thanks hastily, and left.

If memory served him right, the friendliness of the farmer was the last he'd see. In the cities, even in the old days, men were too busy with their own importance and superiority to bother with others. But beggars made ill choosers.

The god clumped down the hot sidewalk, avoiding the press of the one o'clock rush, and surveyed the signs thoughtfully. Food should come first, he guessed, but the prices were discouraging. One read:

BUSINESS MAN'S LUNCH

Blue plate special, 75 c

He cut away from the large street into an older part of the city, and found that the prices dropped steadily. Finally a sign that suited his pocket came into view, and he turned in, picking the only vacant booth. Now he was thankful for the time he'd believed wasted in studying men's ways.

The menu meant little to him. He studied it carefully, and decided that the safest course was to order one of their combinations. Fish—no, that was food for Poseidon. But the lamb plate looked better, and the price fell within his means. "Lamb," he ordered.

The waitress shifted her eyes from the man behind the counter and wrote it down in the manner of all waitresses who expect no tip from the customer. "Coffeetearmilk?" she asked. "Roller-whiterrrye?"

"Eh? Oh, milk and roll." Pan had a word for her type in several languages, and was tempted to use it. As a god—but he wasn't a god now, and men no longer respected their gods, anyway. The cashier eyed his clothes thoughtfully until he moved in irritation, jingling the few coins in his pocket. Then she went back to her tickets, flipping gum from one tooth to another in an abstract manner.

The food, when it came, was a soggy-looking mess, to him, but that was true of all human food, and he supposed it was good enough. At least the plate was better filled than those he had seen through the windows of the more expensive places, and Pan's appetite was immense. He stuffed half a roll in his mouth and chewed on it quickly.

Not bad; in fact, he might grow to like this business of eating. His stomach quieted down and made itself at home, while another half bun followed the

first. As he started to pick up the cut meat and swallow it, he caught the eyes of another diner, and rumbled unhappily. Should he know the sissies nipped off shavings with their knives and minced the food down? But he put the meat back on the plate and fell to as they did. It was best to ape them.

"Mind if I sit here, old-timer?" Pan looked up at a clean-cut young man. "The other booths are filled, you know."

Where the man sat was no business of his. The seat opposite him was vacant, and he motioned to it. "I didn't buy it, and your face isn't misshapen. Sit down."

The other grinned good-naturedly and inspected the menu. "Lamb any good?"

"Seems all right." He was no judge of food, naturally, but it wasn't burned, and he had seen no dirt on it. At least his stomach was satisfied. He cleaned the last of the gravy from his plate with a bun and transferred it to his mouth. "At least, it partly fills a man."

"O.K., lamb it is." This time the waitress showed more interest and even brought water, a thing she'd neglected before. "Make it lamb, sugar. And a beer. How about you, stranger?"

"Eh?" Unless he was mistaken, that was an invitation, and a welcome one. It was long years since he'd had a chance to sample even the anemic brew of the modern world, but that had been none of his choosing.

"Have a beer?"

"Why not?" As an after-thought, he added an ungodlike thanks. The man was likable, he decided, though friendship among city men was not what he had expected. "You wouldn't know about work in this city, would you—uh?"

"Bob Bailey."

"Men call me Pan—or Faunus, sometimes."

"Pan Faunus, eh? Tried the want ads yet, or the employment agencies?" Bailey pulled a folded paper from his pocket and handed it over. "There might be a job in the back there. What kind of work?"

"Whatever I can do." He began at the bottom and skimmed up the list from xylophone players to bartenders. "But nothing they have here. I'm supposed to to be good at herding and playing the syrinx, but that's about all."

"Syrinx?" He inspected the instrument Pan held out, and amusement danced in his eyes. "Oh, that. Afraid it

wouldn't do, Mr Faunus. You don't happen to play the clarinet?"

"Never tried it."

"Then you don't. I'm looking for someone who does, right now, for my band—Bob Bailey's Barnstormers. Ever hear of it? Well, you're not the only one. Since we lost the best darned clarinetist in the business we've slipped plenty. Playing the third-rate spots now with the substitute we had to hire. Corny? *Wheoo!* He used to be on the Lady Lee Lullaby hour, and never got over it."

"Why not get a good one then?" The talk made little sense to the god, but the solution seemed obvious.

"Where? We get plenty of applicants—there's an ad in there now. But they'd either soothe the jitterbugs to sleep or rattle the strings off the dog house. Not a good clear tone in the bunch. All the good guys are signed up, or starting their own outfits."

They finished the beers and Pan counted out the amount marked on his ticket, estimating the length of time what was left would last; two days maybe, by going half hungry. He grunted. "Where are these employment agencies you mentioned?"

"One just down the street. It's a United States' employment center, and won't try to rob you. Good luck, Faunus."

"And to you. My thanks for the beer." Then they separated, and Pan headed down the street toward the mecca of the jobless. The ads had all called for training of some sort, but there must be other work in this town that needed no previous experience. Perhaps meeting two friendly men in one day was a good omen. He hoped so.

The girl at the desk, when he finally found the right division, looked as bored as had the waitress. Looking over the collection of people waiting, Pan felt she had more reason. There were the coarsened red faces of professional sots, the lack-luster stares of men whose intelligence ranked slightly below the apes, and the dreary faces of people who struggled futilely for a life that brings nothing but death to break its monotony.

But there were others there who looked efficient and purposeful, and these were the ones Pan feared. They had at least some training, some experience, and their appearance was better than his. Surely the preference would go to them, and even as a minority,

there were still many of that type there.

He studied the applicants and strained his ears to familiarize himself with the questions asked, holding down his impatience as best he could. But the machine ground slowly on, and his time finally came, just as the hot fetid air was becoming unbearable. "Your name," said the girl studying him impersonally.

"Pan—Pan, Faunus."

Many strange names had passed over the desk to her, and her expression remained the same. "Middle name?"

"Uh . . . Sylvanus." The Romans had done him a good turn in doubling up on their names for him, though he preferred the Greek.

"Address?"

For a moment, that stumped him. Then he gave the address of the restaurant, figuring that he might be able to arrange with the cashier to accept any mail that came there; he'd heard another man talking of that scheme while he waited, and it was as good as any.

"Age?"

"Seven thou— *Ulp!* Forty-five." Since a pack of lies were needed of him, they might as well be good ones. "Born June 5, 1894."

There were more question, and at some of his answers the girl looked up sharply, but his wits had always been good, and he passed the test with some fair success. Then came what he had been dreading.

"Experience and type of work?"

"General work in the country," he decided. "No trade, and I can't give references, since my former foll—employer is dead."

"Social Security Number?"

"Eh?" He had been hearing that asked of the applicants, but it still meant nothing to him. "I don't have one."

"Sorry." She nodded. "Naturally you wouldn't, as a farmhand. You'll have to have a card, though. Get that as soon as you find work."

Finally it was done, and he was sent into a cubbyhole where a man asked more questions and made marks on a piece of paper. Some of his answers were true; Hermes was his father, at least. Even that questioning came to a final end that left him sweating and cursing the underclothes that itched again in the hot room. The man leaned back and surveyed him.

"We haven't much of a job for you, Mr. Faunus. As a matter of fact, you'd probably do much better in the country

where you came from. But"—he searched through his records—"this call just came in for an office boy, and they want someone of your age, for some reason. It pays only \$12.50 a week, but they didn't mention experience. Want to try it?"

Pan nodded emphatically and blessed the luck that had opened the job at precisely the right moment; he'd seen enough others turned away to know how small his chances were. He wasted no time in taking the little address slip and tracking the job to its lair.

Late afternoon found him less enthusiastic about the work. The air in office was thick and stuffy, and there was an incessant thudding from the typewriters, jarring of the comptometer, and the general buzz that men think necessary to business. He leaned over on the table, taking some of the ache from his tired feet and cursing the endless piles of envelopes that needed sealing and stamping.

This was work for a fool or one of the machines men were so proud of. Pick up an envelope, draw one finger under the flap to lift it, roll the flap over the wet roller, and close it with the other hand as it came off. Lift, roll, seal, lift, roll, seal. No wonder men shut themselves in tight houses, away from the good, clean winds and light of the sun; they were ashamed of what served for life among them, and with good reason.

But if it had to be done, he was willing to try. At first, the exultation of getting the work had served to keep his mind from it. Lying and deceit were not his specialty, and only a driving urge to adapt himself had made him use them to the extent that had been necessary. Now the men had put him on work that shriveled the mind, and did the muscles no good.

The old office boy came up to inspect his work, and Pan understood, looking at him, why the manager no longer wanted boys. The kid didn't know as yet that his job was being taken over, but thought he was in line for promotion, and was cocky enough for two. He seized the envelope rudely and ran it over the roller with a flourish.

"Awful dumb help they're sending out these days," he told the air. "Now I told you these had to go out tonight, and I find you loafing. Keep moving. You don't catch me laying down on the job. Ain't you never had work before?"

Pan looked at him, a side-long glance that choked off the kid's words, and fell to on the envelopes again. The air was getting the best of him. His head felt numb and thick, and his whole body was logy and dull. With what was supposed to be a chummy air, the boy sat his overgrown body on the desk and opened up his reservoir of personal anecdotes.

"Boy, you should 'a' been with me last night. Good-looking babes—Hm-m-m! Maybe they didn't like me, too. One little baby'd seen me work on the football team last year, and that didn't do me any harm. Best high school team in the State we had. You like football, guy?"

Pan's lips twitched. "No!" He redid an envelope that hadn't been properly wetted and reviewed the reasons for not committing mayhem on the boy. They were good reasons, but their value was depreciating with the passage of time in the stinking office, and with each new visit from the boy. The direct bluntness he longed to use came out a little in his voice, and the kid bounced off the table, scowling.

"O.K., don't let it get you. Hey, whatda you think stamps are? Don't tear them that way. Some of you hicks are ignorant enough to eat them."

The god caught himself on the table again, throbbing pains running through his head. There was a conference around the manager's desk and cigar smoke was being added to the thickness of the room. He groped out behind him for a stool, and eased himself down on it. Something sharp cut into him, and brought him up with a wild bellow!

The boy giggled. "Dawgonne, I didn't think you'd fall for it. Oldest trick there is, and you still sat right down on that tack. Boy, you should 'a' seen yourself."

Pan wasn't seeing himself, but he was seeing red. Homeric Greek is probably the most expressive of all languages, and his command of it included a good deal Homer had forgotten to mention. With a sharp leap, his head came down and his body jerked forward. He missed the horns, now, but his hard skull on the boy's midsection served well enough.

Sudden confusion ran through the office, and the manager rose quickly from his chair and headed toward the scene. Pan's senses were returning and he knew it was time to leave. The back door opened on an alley and he didn't wait to ask for directions.

The outer air removed the last traces of his temper and sobered him down, but there was no regret in his mind. What was done was done, and there was no room in his philosophy for regrets. Of course, word of it would get back to the employment agency, and he'd have no more jobs from them, but he wanted no more of such jobs. Maybe Apollo had the right idea in dying.

He made a slow meal in the restaurant, noting that Bailey was not there. He'd liked that young man. With a rush of extravagance, he bought a beer for himself and hung around, half waiting in hopes of Bailey's appearance and half planning for tomorrow; but nothing came of his plans.

Finally he got up and moved out into a little park across from the restaurant, just as darkness began to replace the twilight. Sleeping accommodations were the least of his worries. He found a large bush which concealed his body, and lay down on the ground under it. Sleep came quickly.

When he awoke, he found himself better for the sleep, though the same wasn't true of his clothes. He located his shoes and clamped his hoofs into them again, muttering dark thoughts about cobblers in general. If this kept up, he'd get bog spavins yet.

He made his way across to the restaurant again, where the waitress who was on at that hour regarded him with less approval than the other had. Out of the great pity of heart, her actions said, she'd condescend to serve him, but she'd be the last to object to his disappearance. The sweet bun he got must have been well chosen for dryness.

"Hello there, old-timer." Bob Bailey's easy voice broke in on his gloom as the young man sat down opposite him. His eyes studied the god's clothes, and he nodded faintly to himself, but made no comment. "Have any luck yesterday?"

"Some, if you'd call it that." Pan related his fortunes shortly. Bailey grinned faintly.

"The trouble with you," Bailey said around a mouthful of eggs, "is that you're a man; employers don't want that. They want machines with self-starters and a high regard for so-called business ideals. Takes several years to inculcate a man with the proper reverence for all forms of knuckling under. You're supposed to lie down and take it, no matter how little you like it."

"Even empty fools who hold themselves better than gods?"

"That or worse; I know something about it myself. Stood all I could of a two-bit, white-collar job before I organized the Barnstormers."

Pan considered the prospect, and wondered how long it would take him to starve. "Slavery isn't what I'm looking for. Find your musician?"

"Not a chance. When they've got rhythm, they don't bother learning to play; and most of them don't have it. Smoke?"

Pan took the cigarette doubtfully, and mimicked the other's actions. He'd seen men smoking for centuries now, but the urge to try it had never come to him. He coughed over the first puff, letting out a bleat that startled the couple in the next booth, then set about mastering this smoke-sucking. Once the harsh sting of the tobacco was gone, there was something oddly soothing about it, and his vigorous good health threw off any toxic effect it might have had.

Bob finished his breakfast, and picked up the checks. "On me, Faunus," he said. "The shows should open in a few minutes. Want to take one in?"

Pan shook his head vigorously. The close-packed throng of humans in a dark theater was not his idea of a soothing atmosphere. "I'm going over to the park again. Maybe in the outdoor air, I can find some idea."

"O.K., we'll make it a twosome, if it's

all right with you. Time to kill is about the only thing I have now." As he paid the checks, Pan noticed that the man's pocketbook was anything but overflowing, and guessed that one of Bailey's difficulties was inability to pay for a first-class musician.

They found a bench in the shade and sat down together, each thinking of his own troubles and mulling over the other's. It was the best way in the world of feeling miserable. Above them in a tree, a bird settled down to a high, bubbling little song and a squirrel came over to them with the faint hopes of peanuts clearly in its mind.

Pan clucked at it, making clicking sounds that brought its beady little eyes up at him quickly. It was a fat well-fed squirrel that had domesticated man nicely for its purposes, and there was no fear about it. When even the animals had learned to live with man and like it, surely a god could do as well.

He tapped his thighs slowly and felt the syrinx under his hand. The squirrel regarded him carefully as he drew it out, saw there was no bag of peanuts there, and started to withdraw. The first low notes blown from the reeds called it back, and it sat down on its tail, paws to its mouth in a rapt attitude that aped a critic listening to Bach.

Pan took courage, and the old bluff

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laughter fell from his lips. He lifted the syrx again and began a wild quick air on the spur of the moment, letting the music roam through the notes as it would. There was no set tempo, but his feet tapped lightly on the graveled path, and the bird fell in step.

Bailey looked up quickly, his fingers twitching at the irregular rhythm. There was a wildness to it, a primitiveness that barely escaped savagery, and groped out toward man's first awareness of the fierce wild joy of living. Now the notes formed into a regular cadence that could be followed, and Bailey whistled an impromptu harmony. The squirrel swayed lightly from side to side, twitching his tail.

"Jitterbug, isn't he?" Bob asked, as Pan paused. "I've never seen music hit an animal that way before. Where'd you learn the piece?"

"Learn it?" Pan shook his head. "Music isn't learned—it's something that comes from inside."

"You mean you made that up as you went along? *Whew!* But you can play a regular tune, can't you?"

"I never tried."

"Uh. Well, here's one." He pursed his lips and began whistling one of his swiny popular things his orchestra played at, but never hit. Pan listened to it carefully, only half sure he liked it, then put the syrx to his lips, beat his foot for time, and repeated it. But there were minor variations that somehow lifted it and set the rhythm bouncing along, reaching out to the squirrel and making it's tail twitch frenziedly.

Bailey slapped him on the back, grinning. "Old-timer," he chuckled, "you've got the corniest instrument there is, but you can roll it down the groove. I'd like to have the boys hear what a real hepcat can do to a piece."

Pan's face was blank, though the voice seemed approving. "Can't you speak English?"

"Sure. I'm telling you you're hot. Give the jitterbugs an earful of that and top-billing would follow after. Come on!"

Pan followed him, uncertain. "Where?"

"Over to the boys. If you can wrap your lips around a clarinet the way you

do that thing, our worries are over. And I'm betting you can."

It was their last night's engagement at the Grotto a month later, and Pan stood up, roaring out the doggerel words in a deep rich basso that caught and lifted the song. Strictly speaking, his voice was a little too true for swing, but the boisterous paganism in it was like a beat note from a tuba, something that refused to permit feet to be still. Then it ended, and the usual clamor followed. His singing was a recent experiment, but it went over.

Bob shook hands with himself and grinned. "Great, Pan! You're hot tonight." Then he stepped to the microphone. "And now, for our last number, folks, I'd like to present a new tune for the first time ever played. 'It's called 'The Gods Got Rhythm,' and we think you'll like it. Words and music by Tin Pan Faunus, the Idol of the Jitterbugs. O.K., Tin Pan, take it!"

Pan cuddled the clarinet in his mouth and watched the crowd stampede out onto the floor. Bob winked at him, and he opened up, watching the dancers. This was like the rest, a wild ecstasy that refused to let them stay still. Primitive, vital, every nerve alive to the music. Even the nymphs of old had danced less savagely to his piping.

One of the boys passed a note over to his knee, and he glanced at it as he played. "Boys, we're set. Peterson just gave Bob the signal, and that means three months at the Crystal Palace. Good-by blues."

Pan opened up, letting the other instruments idle in the background, and went in for a private jam session of his own. Out on the floor were his worshipers, every step an act of homage to him. Homage that paid dividends, and was as real in its way as the sacrifices of old; but that was a minor detail. Right now he was hot.

He lifted the instrument higher, drawing out the last wild ecstasy from it. Under his clothes, his tail twitched sharply, but the dancers couldn't see that, and wouldn't have cared if they had. Tin Pan Faunus, Idol of the Jitterbugs, was playing, and that was enough.



THE KRAKEN

By FREDERICK ENGELHARDT

The Kraken is a myth of long ago; not a thing that could exist today. And naval officials like neat and understandable records—

LIKE a sounding whale plagued by hunters, the *U-213* lifted her fluked tail and plunged toward the bottom. Down, down she went, trailing a necklace of bubbles forced from her ballast tanks. Now a darker streamer was torn from her side by the rushing water and wafted to the surface. There it spread, glowing with myriad colors under the cold northern sun, to mark the descent of the steel leviathan.

In the bowels of the monster silence reigned, save for the intrusive rumbling of the waters as she clove through the depths. The pale lights made masks of the faces of the crew, who, braced in grotesque attitudes against the steep descent, waited in stolid patience for orders—or death. Amidships, in the cluttered control chamber, Korvettenkapitan Lothar Diedrich fixed his monocle in a dispassionate gaze on the crawling needles of the fathometer.

When the point quivered on "40" he barked an order and a square, bronzed giant beside him wrenched at the spokes of a wheel set into the steel bulkhead. The needle slowed in its course around the dial and the deck was level. The rumbling of the water died away to a faint murmur. Diedrich released his hold on the periscope standard and turned to his second in command.

"We fooled them," he remarked in a cold, brittle tone. "One would think they would get wise to that old oil trick. But the *dummkopf* will steam back to Kirkwall at full speed to brag that another raider has been destroyed. Here"—he caught a headphone set from an impassive sailor and held them out—"listen. Their propeller beat grows fainter already."

Oberleutnant Graf Gunther von Rothberg accepted the phones and clapped one to his ear. The rhythmic throbbing of the English destroyer's screws was barely audible, even though amplified by the sensitive audiophone.

"This calls for a toast," he grinned at the bearded commander.

"It will have to be *schnapps*, then," the other retorted. "The champagne we

took from that Frenchman two weeks ago is all gone. Call the steward."

While the crew looked on woodenly, but none the less thirstily, the two Junkers, with the assistance of the engineer and gunnery officers, drank damnation to the enemy.

Meanwhile, the *U-213*, her motors stopped, hung in the black depths, three hundred feet below the surface and an equal distance from the oozy black bottom.

It had been a successful hunt for the Kraken. Five porpoises, a small whale and thousands of herring were digesting inside the great bag that was its stomach. With its eight sucker-lined tentacles folded complacently over the pink mouth of the bag, and its two long feelers thrown out in the current, just in case something in the way of dessert came along, the Kraken floated comfortably at a depth of some twenty fathoms.

Then, without warning, the great bag was suddenly constricted. The whale shot from the pink mouth like a discharged torpedo, followed immediately by the remains of the porpoises and a dark cloud that had been a school of herring. The ten serpentine arms writhed as the deflated bag twisted around the calcareous slab that served the Kraken as a skeleton.

Scarcely had the Kraken resumed his normal shape when that terrible, invisible force seized it again. Four times in all was the monster subjected to this weird *squeeze*, and the experience left it momentarily helpless and not a little afraid.

Twelve centuries had passed since the Kraken was spawned in the cold North Sea, a miniature of its present self, not one tenth as large as the smallest sucker disk on its newest tentacle. It was ten since the growing cephalopod, even then a giant among its race, had learned to seize those strange fish that swam only on the surface and pick off the tiny but delectable parasites that cluttered their backs. Fully two centuries ago the Kraken, stung painfully by these same queer fish, had abandoned the

surface of the sea and taken to the quiet depths.

Even here, the monster now remembered, it had not always been safe. This was not the first time it had suffered from that invisible but none the less potent squeeze. But the sea offered only two realms: the surface and the depths. The Kraken had been driven from one. It determined to fight for the other.

With a flash of its broad fins that, stretching along each side of its bag-like stomach, made that vast appendage serve also in lieu of a body, the Kraken surged forward. Its two long feeler tentacles probed the darkness ahead, searching for this new enemy.

Diedrich lowered his glass to receive the report of a stocky *bootsmannmaat*. "No leaks, no plates strained, *Herr Kapitan*."

"Good," nodded the commander. "Not that I expected anything of the sort. Gentlemen, may trouble always avoid us by as wide a berth as the *Englander* depth bombs give us."

"Sinful," remarked von Rothberg. "Wasting all that money just to kill a few fish."

The others laughed and held out their glasses to the steward. But the amber liquor never reached them. Even as the man tilted the bottle, the *U-213* rolled heavily to port, then swung back in an arc that laid her on her beam ends. Men and gear were catapulted across the narrow chambers, and from the bow came a rumble and screams of agony. The gunnery officer was the first to extricate himself from the tangle in the control chamber.

"A torpedo is loose," he cried, clambering awkwardly over the maze of pipes, wires and valves that lined the submarine's sides. The next moment he was hurled into a corner where his head hit a pipe with a sickening crunch.

The ship rolled faster, in ever lengthening arcs, while the crew tumbled about helplessly. Cries of pain and alarm echoed through the white steel tunnel, punctuated with the metallic clamor of tools and gear gone wildly adrift.

"Battle stations!" roared Diedrich, clawing to his feet. A rivulet of blood trickled down his face and disappeared into his golden beard, but the monocle still glittered in his right eye. "Secure all! Stand by to blow tanks!"

A warning siren cut through the clamor and men fought their way to

their posts, where they clung desperately to anything that would afford a hand hold.

"Blow all tanks!"

Hissing and gurgling, the compressed air slowly forced the sea water out of the buoyancy tanks. Lightened, the *U-213* started to rise to the surface. But with her own increasing buoyancy and the lessening of the pressure, she rolled more and more violently. Her stern seemed held in a vise, but the bow threshed about wildly. The commander, eyeing the instruments, was frankly bewildered.

"Name of God, what is it?" cried von Rothberg.

Diedrich shook his head! The *U-213* was up to twenty fathoms and rising fast—but nowhere near as fast as she should. "Full ahead, both motors!" he barked.

Under the impetus of her twin screws, the *U-213* surged ahead. At once the violence of the rolling decreased, and the bow no longer whipped about like a charged wire.

"Up ship!" Diedrich commanded. Men sprang to the levers controlling the elevator planes and the submarine began to climb. Faster and faster moved the needle of the fathometer, until it read zero. The ship gave one final spurt and came down to an even keel with a bone-jarring crash.

"All clear on the surface," Diedrich muttered, revolving the periscope. "Surface battle stations! We'll see what was playing with us."

The hatch overhead clanged open and the commander, followed by his lieutenant and three seamen, two of whom carried an unmounted machine gun, climbed the steel ladder to the chariot bridge. While the seamen mounted the gun, the two officers scanned the choppy surface of the sea.

"Nothing!" growled von Rothberg. "Not a thing in sight. But what could have tossed us around? Submarine volcano eruption?"

"No," answered Diedrich. "Nothing like that. We'd have felt the heat. Did you notice, after the motors started, the ship hung for a moment, then leaped like a frightened hare? Something had hold of us."

The sea gave no answer. Except for half a dozen wheeling gulls, there was not another living thing in sight. Forward, a somewhat battered gun crew had the 105-millimeter rifle stripped for

action and were looking grimly about for a target.

"Switch to the Diesels," Diedrich ordered. "No use running down our batteries." The humming of the electric motors ceased and the coughing of the surface engines took its place. Diedrich took the wheel and swung the *U-213* in a wide circle. "We were going almost due north when we came up," he commented. "We'll backtrack a little. Maybe we'll raise something."

It was perhaps five minutes later that von Rothberg turned a puzzled face to his commander. "We seem to be slowing down," he said.

Diedrich turned from his search of the surface and shot a glance ahead. The bow wave was rapidly diminishing, and what little there still was could be accounted for by the rising wind current. Aft there was a tremendous boil as the powerful screws bit into the solid water. The ship was beginning to vibrate.

"This is it," the commander said softly. "Look alive, now." His hand sought the engine-room telegraph and rang to "Stop." The vibration ceased and the ship rode easily.

"Got im himmell!"

The cry was wrung from one of the gunners forward. He stood up to his knees in the green water, seemingly rooted to a spot from which his comrades had retreated. The man cried aloud again, then whipped out his knife and stabbed viciously at something close to his legs.

"She's going down by the bow," the lieutenant cried, starting forward. "The gun platform's awash."

He had scarcely cleared the high bridge when the gunner, still screaming, was borne across the deck and disappeared into the water off the port side. His mates stood by dumbly.

"Grab him!" shouted the officer. "Do something! *Schnell!*"

Then von Rothberg, too, halted dumbly. Creeping across the tapering deck of the submarine were six immense tentacles, each as thick as a hundred-year oak. Slowly, deliberately they moved, three rising from each side of the ship. As the tips met and passed, like nothing so much as a monstrous, living claw, the deck dipped under their weight and green water poured through the open forward hatch.

"The hatch!" roared Diedrich from the bridge. "Close it!"

The command was unnecessary.

Willing hands appeared from below and the steel hatch clanged shut. A series of muffled rings followed as the dogs were locked home. A cry went up from the remaining gunners.

"The Kraken! The Kraken! We are lost."

"Swing that rifle around," ordered the commander. "Train it on those damned tentacles where they clear the ship. Rapid fire, if you value your lives."

From Diedrich's side came the chatter of the machine gun. A line of holes appeared along the nearest tentacle. But the beast under the ship minded them as little as a bull minds the scratch of a thorn bush. The tentacle quivered slightly, but did not pause in its course across the deck.

The rifle spat flame, and as the roar of the explosion rocked the men on the bridge they saw one of the six mighty arms whip into the air fall limply into the sea. A cheer went up from the gunners as they rammed home another round. Again the big rifle spoke, and again a severed tentacle slithered back into the green sea.

"Ausgucken!"

Diedrich screamed the warning, but deafened by the reports of the big rifle, the gunners failed to hear it. Another second and it was too late. The Kraken's two feeler tentacles, five times as long as its eight regular arms, had risen from the sea and hung over the exulting gun crew, the spatulate tips undulating. Then, striking with the speed of vipers, they scooped up the five men and pulled them under the surface.

By now the great tentacles were seemingly endless loops thrown over the fore part of the slender hull. The immense weight of the monster, whose displacement exceeded that of the *U-213* herself, was steadily pulling the submarine under.

"Prepare to dive!" groaned Diedrich.

The siren wailed in the bowels of the ship as the survivors dropped down the ladder. The water was already lapping at the chariot bridge as the commander, with a last despairing look forward, descended and closed the hatch.

"We can't fight that monster," he told the lieutenant, who was regarding him questioning. "Not now, anyway, while it's clinging to the ship."

"Perhaps it will shift forward," von Rothberg said hopefully. "In front of the tubes. And then—"

"Are you a fool?" snapped Diedrich. "Would you explode a torpedo under our

very bows? We might as well seek the depth bombs of the English."

In its present position the submarine was absolutely helpless. Its bow, under the weight of the Kraken, was submerged, while its stern stood clear of the surface.

"Flood the forward tanks," snapped Diedrich. "We'll try a crash dive. Maybe we can shake that *teufel* off. Shades of the good Bishop Pontoppidan. He was not far wrong when he described the Kraken as being two kilometers across."

"You believe those superstitions, *Herr Kapitan*?" cried von Rothberg above the gurgling of the sea water.

"I believe my own eyes, *leutnant*," the older man snapped back. "Did you recognize that monster? It is a cuttlefish, a cephalopod. But the *grosspapa* of them all. It must be hundreds of years old, if not a thousand. I'm afraid poor Heinkel, the gunner, was right. It is the Kraken."

"But the Kraken," insisted von Rothberg, "has not been reported in two hundred years. Be reasonable, *Herr Kapitan*. This is bad enough as it is."

"Reported," no. But how do you know the monster has not been *sighted*? How many North Sea fishermen could engage this beast and return home to tell of it? What chance would a smack, or a trawler, even, have? Only our steel plates have saved us."

Von Rothberg would have protested further, but just then the U-boat's stern sank beneath the water and the screws took hold, driving the ship toward the bottom. Diedrich spun to his instruments, and signaled for the stern tanks to be flooded, to restore the ship's equilibrium when the Kraken had been shaken off.

As the Kraken bored through the depths, anger seethed along the few nerve threads that served the monster as a brain. It was not so much the pain of being squeezed—for, with its limited nervous system, the Kraken did not feel pain easily—but the loss of its dinner. It had been many years since the Kraken had dined so well. Those odd fish that swam on the surface, and which, long ago, drove him to the depths, were gobbling up the best of the schools. The Kraken knew this, because it had occasionally caught and crushed such fish and found tons of herring inside.

But still, the Kraken was not a natural fighter. Not since it had passed its hundredth birthday had it found it necessary to fight for its life. Nor, with its vast bulk and infinitesimal brain, was it easily

aroused. Twenty-odd years before—it might have been yesterday to the Kraken—that strange but powerful *squeeze* had seized it. Sometimes its pressure was violent, sometimes merely annoying. The Kraken had almost forgotten it when it was caught again in the diamond patterned quadruple explosion of the ash cans dumped on the U-213.

Had the Kraken found no enemy, the odds are the monster would have gone on, seeking another dinner. But the submerged U-boat lay in its path.

The instant the Kraken's feelers contacted the cold steel hull they recoiled. Cautiously the Kraken advanced, until its huge globular eyes were focused on the motionless ship. It looked like a whale, but the Kraken knew very well it wasn't. No whale, even asleep, would allow its natural enemy to approach so closely. Around, over and under the stranger the Kraken swam. Then, becoming bolder, the monster shot out its feelers and seized the fluked tail. Still there was no sign of life. The Kraken drifted up to the ship, wrapped its many working arms around the tapering hull, and squeezed.

But the stranger ignored the pressure—a pressure which would have reduced a sperm whale to a pulp. It merely rolled under the Kraken's weight. Then, without warning, it came to life. Water spurted from its sides and it struggled toward the surface. Grimly the Kraken held onto its prize until the sea boiled in its face and forced it away.

Nothing daunted, the monster followed the stranger to the surface, where it started to swim away. Now the Kraken knew what it was: one of the odd fish that were so depleting its food supply. If so, there should be titbits, even if the fish itself was as indigestible as others of its kind. Flicking its immense fins, the Kraken followed, came up under the other and seized it again just behind the head. This time it would not escape.

Patiently the sucker disks crawled up and over the steel hull, tightening the grip of the mighty tentacles. As the tips of the serpentine arms looped back under the hull, the Kraken noticed one of the titbits it sought stuck to a sucker disk.

A silent gulp, and Kanoniersmaat Rudolph Himmler had paved the way for his shipmates.

The sudden loss of two tentacles startled the Kraken, but only for a moment. Its appetite whetted by the remaining poor wretches scooped off the deck by his feelers, he renewed his efforts to

subdue the big stranger. This time he was prepared for any sudden maneuver, and was not shaken off when the ship dove headlong toward the bottom.

Half an hour later the Kraken, swimming backward by expelling powerful jets of water from its gills, was towing the *U-213* to its subterranean den.

In the silent control chamber Korvettenkapitan Diedrich paced nervously, hands clasped behind his back and his bullet head thrust forward. Von Rothberg had found a seat and crouched over the *schnapps* bottle which, somehow, had remained unbroken. Forward in the torpedo room and aft in the engine room other men crouched, nursing pannikins of fiery rum issued by the commander's order.

"There is nothing we can do. Nothing," Diedrich muttered. "It is suicide to go on deck while that monster has hold of the ship. We can only wait until it swims away. Perhaps then we may get a shot at it."

"What do you think happened to the gun crew?" the other asked.

"I prefer not to think," Diedrich snapped. He glanced at the chronometer. "It is now half an hour since we cut the motors and let that demon fish tow us where it will." He scanned the other instruments and the telltale tape that recorded their passage. "Nor'nor'cast," he muttered, "at three knots. If this keeps up till midnight, we'll be in the Bukke Fjord."

Von Rothberg said nothing. He was regarding the bottle glumly. It was empty.

Hour after hour Diedrich kept his weary vigil. The air grew steadily fouler. It would have prostrated any but a veteran *unterseeboot* sailor. Long before midnight the Kraken changed course and pointed almost due north, and Diedrich's hope that they might be rescued by one of the Norwegian gunboats based on Stavanger faded.

Then there was a scraping along the steel hull. It made a hellish clamor inside the ship and brought all hands to their feet. It stopped, then started again. Blows fell on the steel skin, and here and there a rivet started, sending a needle-thin stream shooting across the cluttered compartments.

A cry of alarm from the engine room turned Diedrich aft. "What's up?" he bellowed.

An oiler stumbled forward into the control chamber. "Both tail shafts

snapped off, *Herr Kapitan*. Our propellers are gone. And water is coming through the packing boxes."

Diedrich glanced at the fathometer. It showed less than eight fathoms of water over them. A grating sound under his feet told him the ship was being dragged over the bottom.

"Blow all tanks!" he barked.

Von Rothberg came to life. "*Easy, Kapitan*," he warned. "We're in a tunnel of some sort. A cave."

"I guess as much," the commander said. "It would be the monster's den. But we will have to risk hitting the roof or lose our keel, too."

Lightened, the *U-213* rode easier. There was less slamming and banging outside. But from the gyrations of the compass, it was evident they were following a twisting, turning course.

"Where are we?" von Rothberg wanted to know.

"Somewhere near, or under the Island of Karmo," Diedrich answered. "A little north of Skudeneshavn."

"Then we can call for help by radio."

"Yes," the commander conceded, "if we can't work ourselves out of this mess. I don't want the ship interned."

The keel grated along a pebbly bottom and the *U-213* came to rest. A check of the log tape told Diedrich the monster had towed them more than a hundred kilometers. Picking up the audiophone receiver, the commander listened intently. The faint swishing of the Kraken's long fins, which had haunted their passage, had ceased. He raised the periscope and looked around. It was pitch-black above.

"Rig a diver," he ordered, "and prepare the air lock. Equip him with an acetylene torch and a lamp."

A self-contained suit was dragged out of a locker and a young torpedo man reluctantly rigged into it.

"Now listen, Meyer," the commander told him. "I don't want you to take any unnecessary risks. Stick close to the air lock until you are sure the monster isn't around. There isn't much water here. You can blow to the surface using the periscope as a guide. There's a portable radio attached to that suit. Keep in constant communication with us."

"*Jawohl*."

The face plate of the helmet was closed and locked, and willing arms guided the diver to the air lock.

"He's outside now," reported von Rothberg from the radio desk. "He's going

aft." There was silence for a while. A circle of pale faces ringed von Rothberg. "He's under the stern," the lieutenant repeated. "Both screws gone and rudder un-housed. Now he's going up along the deck."

The leaden footsteps of the diver outside rang solemnly over the heads of the men inside the submarine. Unconsciously they looked up.

"He's going up," von Rothberg resumed. "His head is above the surface now. He says we're in a cavern. Plenty of room on all sides and overhead. His light won't reach the— *Mein Gott!*"

Van Rothberg tore the headphones from his ears and looked up in horror. In the dead silence all could hear Meyer's muted screams:

"The Kraken!"

Recovering, the lieutenant replaced the headphones. "The monster has caught him," he told the white-faced, tense circle around him. "It's holding him high in the air."

"Tell the fool to use his torch," barked Diedrich.

"Use your torch on it, Meyer!" von Rothberg repeated. "Your torch, man!" He turned to Diedrich. "He's dropped it."

For a minute there was silence in the cold steel chamber. Then a shrill scream burst from the sensitive receivers. Involuntarily von Rothberg jerked them from his ears. In the tomblike quiet all could hear the doomed torpedo man's wail.

"It's swallowing me, *Herr Kapitän!* I am being devoured! Help! *Herr Kapitän!* *Herr Leutnant!* Help!"

The little circle broke up. The seamen and petty officers slumped to the cold deck and gave way to their emotions. Von Rothberg remained at the radio, the headphones clinging precariously to the back of his close-cropped head. Diedrich, his bearded face impassive and his arms folded across his chest, stood like a statue, the pale light glittering on his monocle. From time to time one of the others looked up at him hopefully.

Several minutes passed thus, then the headphones again stuttered. The lieutenant hastily shoved them back into place and listened intently. "Meyer's still alive," he reported. "He's in the monster's stomach. He still has his light."

Diedrich remained motionless. Not by a flicker of an eyelash did he betray emotion. The men glanced at him and took their cue. Except for the sibilant breath-

ing enforced by the foul air, the silence remained unbroken.

"He says it is like a monstrous cavern," von Rothberg continued. "The walls are a yellowish-white . . . They sway back and forth . . . They are lined with long white tendrils, like snakes. . . . He says the tendrils are reaching for him. . . . He's clinging to the wall, trying to cut his way out. . . . But it's hopeless. . . . There's a yellowish liquid seeping from the tips of the tendrils. . . . It is becoming foggy. . . . A drop of the liquid fell on his hand and burned. . . . He's afraid he will fall. . . . There's a pool of the liquid at the bottom of the stomach."

"That liquid would be mainly hydrochloric acid," Diedrich cut in. The commander's voice was controlled and icy, but von Rothberg, looking up, saw that his forehead was beaded with perspiration. "A creature of that size, and lacking teeth, would necessarily secrete a powerful digestive juice. Meyer is doomed, but fortunately he still has his knife."

Von Rothberg hesitated a moment and licked his dry lips. Then he spoke into the transmitter in a low voice. "You are lost, Meyer," he said. "We cannot help you. But you can die like a human being. Use your knife."

The lieutenant listened with bowed head. "He won't do it," he told Diedrich. "It is against his religion to commit suicide."

"It is an order."

The lieutenant repeated this. "The captain's order is that you kill yourself, Meyer. Now." There was another brief period of silence, during which von Rothberg's lips formed the word, "Praying."

Diedrich watched him stonily, and when the other jerked convulsively, he reached out and removed the headphones, dropping them on the radio desk. "Let the men have some air from the tanks," he said. "Not too much. And try to raise the home station."

The hissing of the compressed air tanks acted as a tonic on the crew. They came to life, but remained sitting or lying on their bunks. Von Rothberg, forcing the echoes of the unfortunate Meyer's dying cry from his mind, changed the wave length and hammered hopefully at the key.

"Well?" demanded the commander, after half an hour of this.

"No luck," responded the glum lieutenant. "There's a warship nearby. English. She's jamming our messages."

Diedrich swore roundly.

"Shall I try to raise the *Englander*?" von Rothberg asked. "Maybe they can get us out of here."

Diedrich shook his head. "No," he spat. "I won't give them the satisfaction of knowing we have fallen victim to a *verdammte fisch*. Put a man on the audiophone. The Kraken will leave this den sometime. Then we will rise to the surface and look for a way out."

But it was two days before the Kraken left the cavern and swam through the water-filled tunnel to the open sea. During this time the crew of the *U-213* lay sprawled in a stupor, induced by liberal doses of veronal, laudanum and whatever other soporifics the medicine chest offered. The practical-minded Diedrich, having no immediate use for them, and knowing that quiescent men require less oxygen, had chosen this way of conserving their dwindling supply of compressed air.

Diedrich, von Rotheberg, the engineer officer and the three senior petty officers, the only men remaining conscious, were sitting in the control chamber when the welcome swish of the monster's fins was heard on the audiophone. Diedrich immediately snatched the headphones from the radio man.

"It's going out, at last," he exulted. "The sounds are barely perceptible. But we'll wait till it's out of the tunnel."

It was a long wait for the impatient men. The tunnel, the commander had calculated, from the tell-tale strips, was fully a mile long.

"All right now," he said finally. "Blow all tanks, easy."

Diedrich, as captain, opened the bridge hatch and was the first man outside. He sniffed cautiously. The air was musty and heavy with the odor of the sea and dead fish, but to men confined in a steel shell more than sixty hours, it was sweet. The remaining five climbed up after him and inhaled noisily.

"It will take that monster many hours, perhaps a full day, to feed," Diedrich said. "That will give us time to explore and, if necessary, prepare a defense. Try the searchlight, lieutenant."

Von Rothberg swung the powerful beam in a complete circle. All around them was solid rock. There was no sign of the tunnel through which the *U-213* had been dragged.

"I was afraid of that," Diedrich said.

"The tunnel mouth is under water. We'll have a devil of a time locating it. Search overhead."

The beam shot upward three hundred meters before it was reflected from the stone ceiling. Von Rothberg played it over the whole vast dome. There was no opening, no hint of one.

"There must be a vent somewhere," he told the commander. "This air is reasonably fresh."

"Take two men and the small boat and skirt the sides of this pool. You realize what it is, of course?"

"An ancient volcano?"

"Not exactly. Notice the folds in that rock. This stratum was forced up at sometime and has subsequently been excavated by the sea. You can see the marks of erosion. A general subsistence of the land carried the tunnel below sea level."

Several of the men below recovered consciousness and Diedrich turned them out. The rifle on the foredeck was cleaned and half a dozen rounds of high explosive shells were stacked beside it. The ship rode easily at anchor in the center of the pool. There was no place to moor her, and, anyway, Diedrich decided it would be safer to leave her where, if the Kraken should attack, she could not be slammed against anything harder than water.

"There's only one vent," von Rothberg reported on his return, "and it's entirely out of reach. Halfway to the top of the dome."

A groan went up from the others—with the exception of the iron commander. With the loss of her propellers the submarine was helpless, and their hopes had been based on finding a land exit from the cavern.

"We'll get out, Diedrich reassured them. "But first, we must kill this monster. We can do nothing while there's a danger that it will appear."

Watches were resumed and the *U-213's* crew settled down to await the return of the enemy. Big as the Kraken was, it could not survive half a dozen high explosive shells. A measure of confidence returned to the crew, and the older men began to relate stories of the underseas service in which crews had escaped from the dangers as great, almost, as their own.

Diedrich was right in assuming that the Kraken would be busy a full day accumulating a dinner. It was not until three o'clock of the following morning

that the monster signaled his approach on the audiophone. The crew immediately leaped to surface battle stations.

"It's taking its damned time," von Rothberg, standing beside the commander on the chariot bridge, muttered. Nervously he played the powerful beam over the still surface of the water.

"Shut off that light," Diedrich ordered suddenly. "It'll be shy of it and the beam will blind us. I've got a Very pistol. It's bound to splash when it gets into this shallow water."

The light winked out and the ten men—five at the rifle and five on the bridge—waited in utter darkness. Then the water rippled musically and a tiny wave washed against the steel side of the submarine. There was a muffled explosion as Diedrich fired a magnesium flare straight at the domed ceiling. The shell burst and unnaturally white light flooded the cavern.

"There it is. A point off the starboard bow," shouted the lieutenant. "Rapid fire!" Diedrich barked. He hung half over the steel rail, part of his keen brain taking in the grotesque monster threshing toward them, and the rest intent on another danger, almost as great, which he had foreseen, but which he had to risk.

The rifle roared, and the reverberations deafened them. Von Rothberg fired two more flares to give the gunners light. Again and again the big rifle spoke, but in that inclosed space it sounded like a continuous rumbling.

"Lower! Lower!" Diedrich shouted. "Under water! Aim for the body!" But he could not hear the words himself. The gunners, laughing madly in the ghastly light, were scoring direct hits on the giant, writhing tentacles, the only part of the huge caphalopod visible.

Neither Diedrich nor the others heard the first rocks fall, but as he had half expected something of the sort, he was the first to interpret the sudden swells that set the ship to rolling. He glanced aside and saw a column of water rise high into the air not ten feet off their beam. Slapping von Rothberg on the back to attract his attention, Diedrich framed the words:

"Cease firing!"

The lieutenant nodded, ran down the ladder and started forward, where the gunners, with fresh ammunition passed up from below, had resumed their bombardment of the Kraken. He had not taken three steps when a huge section

of the stone roof, dropping like a plummet, wiped gun and crew from sight. The fore part of the hull tore loose at his feet, the tough steel cracking like an eggshell. He went up to his waist in water, then the remainder of the ship, freed of the heavy bow, but still weighted by the engines and batteries aft, rocked back, lifting the gaping wound clear of the surface. A sailor ran to his aid and dragged him back to the comparative security of the bridge.

"Unfortunate," Diedrich murmured. Only the lieutenant was in a position to read his lips.

Turning, von Rothberg glanced below. The stern was sinking, far deeper than the weight of the engines should have carried it. He slipped down the ladder. The floor of the control chamber stood at a forty-five-degree angle. Above him glowed the unholy light of the flare, where the whole forward end of the compartment lay open. Below him was the closed door leading to the engine room and the after compartments. Through the thick glass port set in it he saw water lapping. It was clear to him now. The stern had been stove in, and the shock of that mighty rock that tore off the bow dislodged the door. It had swung shut, the dogs falling into place automatically.

"Kapitan!" he shouted. Then remembering the commander was as deaf as himself, he crawled back up the ladder and caught him by the leg. Diedrich looked down and nodded.

They two, and the three sailors on the bridge, were the sole survivors. And they would not survive long.

Diedrich came down the ladder, followed by the sailors. The latter were peeped with fright and twitching with fear. Diedrich opened the closet containing the self-contained diving rigs. There were seven left. They were not regulation equipment for submarines of *U-213's* class, but Diedrich had brought them in the hope of pulling off one of his many fantastic schemes—that of *carrying* a torpedo into an enemy naval base over the bottom. He now motioned for the others to don suits and got into one himself. Awkwardly, they dressed each other. Von Rothberg found that with the aid of the radio headphones, they could converse, although the others' eardrums must have ruptured like his own.

"The Kraken is not dead yet," Diedrich told them. "I saw it swimming

around. But it has lost all ten tentacles now and is comparatively helpless. It is my idea that it will head for the open sea to escape us."

"And we will follow it through the tunnel?" von Rothberg asked.

Diedrich smiled coldly through the glass face plate. "You forget, *leutnant*, that the tunnel is more than half a kilometer long. And only Father Neptune knows what kind of a bottom it has. No, I intend that the Kraken, who towed us in here, should tow us out."

He picked up a keen-edged harpoon from a locker, fitted it to a shaft and bent the end of a coil of light line to it. With the harpoon in his hand, he went back up the ladder. One of the sailors picked up the line and followed. Von Rothberg brought up the rear.

The commander gave them their instructions. "I'm going to harpoon this fish, and when it dives into the tunnel, you grab the line and go over. Inflate your suits so that you float clear of the bottom. Lieutenant von Rothberg will go first, then you, Hirsh, you, Mueller, and you, Rothner. I will bring up the rear. I caution you, it will be a terrible passage, but whoever lets go of the line will be lost. At my order, cast off and blow to the surface. The tide is flowing now and will wash us ashore."

Diedrich took one last look at his ship, then flexed his arm. It was awkward, hurling a harpoon hampered by a heavy canvas rig, but he would have no time later to get into one. For fully half an hour they waited there while the Kraken, a mere vast bulk of flesh now, threshed the surface. Then the monster drifted close to the ship. The keen blade glittered in the beam of a flashlight which now provided the only illumination. Suddenly Diedrich's arm went back, then flashed forward, and the haft quivered in the mountainous gray body. The line hissed off the deck as the creature sounded. A minute and it whipped into the air, taut as a fiddle-string and stretching toward the far wall. Unceremoniously Diedrich flipped it into von Rothberg's hand and pushed him overboard. The others followed in quick succession, but there was barely two fathoms of line trailing behind the commander when he went over.

As Diedrich had warned, the trip was a nightmare. He was slammed from wall to wall until it took all his iron nerve and determination to hang on. Only the fact that he instinctively shoved his feet ahead of him, so the lead soles took the brunt

of the shocks, kept the suit from being torn off his back. Then a comparatively soft object struck him and clung to him for a moment. Diedrich spun on his line like a deep-sea lead. The manila under his hands was rigid as an iron bar. A sudden terror overcame him. What if the line parted under the weight of this extra drag? He allowed his feet to swing back and kicked savagely. Then the object was whirled away by the current.

How long the passage took, Diedrich never knew. It might have been a minute, and it might have been an hour. But when he felt himself drawn downward, and the pressure increased, he knew they were free of the tunnel. He gave the order to let go and released the line himself. Like a balloon he shot toward the surface, until he remembered to jiggle the flutter valve with his chin and release the excess air in the suit. His ascent was slowed. Immediately he called the others. Only three voices answered.

"So *that* was what struck me in the tunnel," he thought. "Wonder which one?" But he did not ask. The others had their own troubles.

Eventually his helmet broke through the surface. He allowed the suit to fill until he was floating easily, but not head down. Overhead the stars twinkled and a bright moon shone. It was, Diedrich thought, the most glorious sight in the world.

Sometime later Diedrich felt himself being hauled out of the water. Strange hands twisted the globular helmet from his head and stripped the canvas suit from him. He looked up. A man, a sailor from his round cap, was bending over him. Two ribbons fluttered from the back of the cap, each a generous double-handbreadth.

"My men," Diedrich said. "Find them."

"*Jawohl, Herr Kapitan*," the other answered. "We have already picked them up."

Diedrich closed his eyes for the first time in three full days.

When he awoke, he was lying in a bunk between clean sheets. He looked around. It was an officer's room. From the pitching and rolling of the vessel, he knew it was a destroyer. He closed his eyes again. Sometime later a steward entered with a bowl of steaming broth. Diedrich wriggled into a sitting position and wolfed it.

When the steward left, an officer took his place. He, too, wore the three gold

stripes of a *korvetten-kapitan*. He introduced himself as Hans von Wohl, commander of the destroyer, the *Baden*, on North Sea patrol. Diedrich gave his own name and ship.

"You were reported lost," von Wohl said. "The *Englander* that sank you caught the ship's number. And then you were two days overdue. What happened? We tried to question your three men, but they're all raving lunatics. They can only babble about that mythological Kraken. We've got them strapped to bunks."

"Was there an officer among them?" Diedrich asked.

"No. All seamen."

So it had been von Rothberg who had let go in the tunnel. Diedrich's heart sank. In his own way, he had liked the young Junker. He stole a side glance at von Wohl. The latter's square face was stony.

Diedrich turned away to think. There were only Hirsh, Mueller, and Rothner, besides himself, left alive out of a crew of fifty-one. And they were "raving lunatics." Suddenly Diedrich knew he could not tell the truth. Had von Rothberg, an officer and a nobleman, survived to substantiate his story, it might have been different.

"The admiralty will want a report," von Wohl prompted.

"Yes, of course," Diedrich said. "I'm recovered enough to sit up and write."

"We guessed that you crawled through a torpedo tube and blew to the surface," von Wohl went on, "but where did you get the suits?"

"Requisitioned them at Cuxhaven. I had an idea, but never got a chance to try it out. If you will allow me—"

"Of course. Of course. Consider this room as your own. It's the executive officer's. The steward will supply you with whatever you want."

Von Wohl left and Diedrich pulled himself out of the bunk. It was agony to move; he was black and blue from head to foot. But he forced himself into his uniform which, cleaned and pressed, was hanging in a locker. He found a pair of scissors and trimmed his beard. Then, with his monocle set firmly in his right eye, he surveyed himself.

"An undertaker couldn't lay me out better," he told himself.

He found paper and a pen on the desk. His report was brief. He described the sinking of the *U-213* by depth bombs at a point near where he had been picked up. All but the eight men in the control chamber were killed outright or drowned by the flooding of the forward and after compartments, he explained. After waiting nearly three days, and failing to raise another ship or the home station by radio, he said, he had conceived the idea of donning the suits, flooding the control chamber and blowing to the surface. Four of them, apparently, he went on, survived the ascent. The temporary insanity of the others he ascribed to the nerve-racking experience.

He read over the report. It was concise and logical. The admiralty would approve it and file it away with hundreds of others, and the matter would be ended.

Then, because the High Seas Fleet frowned on a captain who survived the loss of his ship and entire crew, he took the executive officer's pistol from the drawer and closed the incident.



TRANSPARENT STUFF

By DOROTHY QUICK

Another tale of the Patchwork Quilt—a tale of ancient Babylon—

THIN, transparent stuff! I examined it closely, trying to place its period in my mind. It was very sheer—woven by hand of what looked like linen with gold and silver threads through it, forming a pattern of fantastic flowers. It was delicately fine, unlike anything I had ever seen.

I had chosen it for my next adventure with the witch's quilt just because I had no way of identifying it. And one thing I was sure—no matter into what far world of the past it would take me, I would meet excitement of some kind or other. The witch who had made the quilt had liked to adventure in the past, to savor all that was strange and horrible in other people's lives. She had collected patches of the garments of various people and bound them together with magic, runelike embroidery until they formed a patchwork quilt. Whatever patch one put their hand on as they went to sleep, that experience was relived.

Aunt Amabel, who owned the quilt which I had discovered quite by accident, told me that after my first terrifying adventure. Sometimes I wondered if what I had been through was an actual experience or just a story invoked into being by the witch's skill. I had no way of finding out. I only knew that there was something very strange and fantastic about it, but also something very fascinating. The witch's world—or worlds—seemed more real to me than my own, and I felt that actually I only began to live when I put my hand on a patch and drifted off into sharing the existence of another being whose life was of more interest than my own drab one.

Before I had the quilt I had been conscious of a great lack in my life. Now I was like one addicted to a narcotic. I only became what I called really and truly alive under the quilt's influence.

I clutched the patch of transparent stuff tightly and turned out the light. Once more I was going to a world where things occurred; even if sometimes the happening were almost unbearable.

The stuff felt very cool to my touch. As I lay there waiting I began to trace the pattern of the unreal flowers with my fingertip, and all at once I realized that I had gone beyond the limits of the patch and that the pattern was still there.

I opened my eyes and looked down. The thin, transparent stuff hung in stiff folds all about me. Through it I could see the gleaming of my skin and from the edges of the skirt my bare feet, thrust in sandals of gilt tied with soft leather, tapped impatiently against a tile floor.

The tiles, of a peculiar shade of greenish blue, were shiny. I could see my reflection in them, and gasped with amazement, for the face that looked back at me was my own face—the face of Alice Strand! Different, of course, for Alice Strand's eyes were not so elongated, nor so heavily outlined, nor were her brows so thick with black that it was an effort to lift the lids. I didn't, in my own existence, wear my hair wound in hundreds of tight ringlets that hung down to my shoulders. My figure was different, too, but there was no mistaking the features. They were my own.

Was I dreaming? Could it be that the other experiences had been dreams? I knew that wasn't so. Yet here I stood in a strange costume—a strange counterpart of myself.

I looked down again. The dress was very transparent and modestly revealing, yet beautiful, for the pattern was exquisite and the flowers were painted in vivid blues and reds. My arms were bare and the neck low cut, but around my neck was a necklace of turquoise and rubies. Turquoise and rubies linked with gold were wound around my wrists and ankles. Whoever I was, I must be highly placed to wear such jewels.

I looked around. I was in a small room; the walls were tiled, too, and the ceiling rose into a dome far above me. There was little furniture—a great thronelike chair behind me, a few stools set about the floor, a jasper table. There were arches along the wall hung with heavy curtains with odd geometric designs.

At this moment I became aware that my foot was tapping more rapidly and that I was growing impatient. I wished I could read more of the minds of those with whom I was so strangely linked. Even the thoughts of this person whom I had once actually been were unknown to me except as she thought them.

"To keep me waiting so!" flashed through her mind, and she clapped her little hands, heavily laden with rings, together.

Before the echo of the sound died away a curtain pulled aside. A tall, spare man entered. He was dressed in a fine pleated linen gown. It was girdled with a gold belt, and he wore a linen headdress held on with a golden band. He had thick black curls, too, and a narrow pointed beard. His face was sly, and his eyes cold, green and glistening like those of a snake.

"O Star of Light, I have been long, but your wishes are heavy—"

"Surely what I ask is simple. Only a glimpse into the future—of which you, Abeshu, are said to hold the keys." The voice issuing from my lips was musical and sweet.

Abeshu answered with asperity.

"Nay, princess, you have it wrong. I do hold keys, it is true, keys that open the doors into the chambers where the great Bel, who owns the Sun, and Marduk, who rules Heaven and Earth, and still others of the gods of Babylon hold their court. Yes, I possess these keys, and sometimes can unlock these doors, yet the risk is great—not only to me who open the way, but to those who tread the path."

Star drew herself up. "So I have an answer to my question. I am not afraid."

"Suppose the answer is death?"

"As Bel decrees." Star shrugged her delicate shoulders. "Sometimes death is better than life."

"Not to the Princess of Babylon, the only heir to Mir-bel, the king of kings—that princess whom all Babylon worships as though she were Ishtar, the goddess of love, herself—whose lightest word is law." Abeshu regarded Star with envy in his glance.

"Why do you not finish and tell all the truth? Star of Light, Princess of Babylon, only heir of Mir-bel, king of kings, whom all Babylon worships, whose lightest word is law—yet who will be given as though she were a bale of silken goods to the highest bidder, wed to a man not of her liking, but of that same King Mir-bel's choice. Name

me those who sue for my hand and the great empire of Babylon which goes with it."

"There is Ditmah, the elder son of the brother of the king of kings."

"You yourself said 'elder,' Abeshu. In truth, Ditmah is almost as old as my father, for thou knowest my father went childless for many years."

"Ay, I know—yet Babylon remains unchanged if you wed Ditmah. Many hold that would be good," Abeshu muttered. "Then there is Khian, the Egyptian, whose age is nearer yours."

"We are of an age, but tell me, Abeshu, is that fat drunken youth fit mate for me?"

The man's eyes took in the pure beauty of the girl standing before him. She was like one of the slender lilies that grew in the palace gardens. He thought of Khian as he had seen him at the feast last night, full of wine and playing with a slave girl's hair.

"No, Star, yet Egypt joined to Babylon is one war less. But if you care not for these two, there is Temu."

"Whose country is the East, and though he may be a great king, I say that he is evil. Nay, more; I have heard that he consorts with demons and has a familiar. The Babylonians are the greatest wizards in the world. You, Abeshu, know all their arts, but Temu can better you, I think, though his ways are darker. Would you give me to that crafty, evil man if you were Mir-bel?"

"Not for your soul's sake, Star of Light. But the King of the East is a maggot that gnaws at Babylon's far armies. Were you Temu's wife, the gnawings would cease."

"Am I, the Princess of Babylon, to be a stop to this maggot? Not if I die for it. Name me more suitors, Abeshu."

"The list is long, Star, but I think none others count but these three."

Star bent her head and pulled a tiny blue glazed bottle from her belt to catch her tears.

"You have spoken. Come, Abeshu, lead me to the temple. Let me ask the gods what hope there is for me, who'd not be made a pawn of state."

Abeshu sighed. "You are willful, Star. It is dangerous to invoke the gods on trivial matters."

Now Star's eyes flashed and her little foot began its tattoo again.

"How is my life trivial? Know, Abeshu, it hangs upon the question."

Drawing himself up, Abeshu shook his head.

"Perhaps even your life is but a whisper in the song of gods. Still, I am not the arbiter. Come, Star of Light, Princess of Babylon." He held aside a curtain, and Star passed through.

Star, her heartbeats quickened a little, followed Abeshu through room after room. Finally they went down a long corridor cut out of stone. In it, at intervals, were narrow, windowlike notches. Once Star looked through into a vast temple which had an effigy of a winged bull with a man's head before whom people worshiped. As they went along, Star could smell incense and hear singing. The sounds and odors ceased as the passage narrowed and slanted downward.

"We near the secret sanctuary. Turn back now, O Star, if you have any fear," Abeshu said.

"Lead on; I follow." This princess was bold!

Abeshu stopped. "Know, Star before we enter this chamber, that you can question but one of the immortals. Choose you which one, and quickly, for the hour grows near when the summons must go forth."

"Who should I call but Ishtar, goddess of love?"

"So bet it," Abeshu answered. "Now follow me and speak nothing unless bidden princess."

He pressed the wall and what looked like solid stone revolved. Abeshu and Star stepped through the opening, and the stone clanged shut. They were in a little place cut from stone. The ventilation was good, and an oil lamp burned. Abeshu pressed the far wall, and the same thing happened again.

Star and Abeshu entered a large stone chamber. There were great pillars of stone and many carvings of winged bulls with faces of men. There was an altar, and behind it, where a representation of a god should have been, a great empty chair of black marble seemed to dominate the room. There was something about that empty chair and its portent that struck terror to Star's heart. She wanted to run away from that silent room. But she stood still, shaping a little prayer of her own making in her thoughts to Bel and Ishtar.

Abeshu busied himself drawing a large circle inside of a double pentagon. Then he drew Star into the center of it.

"Unless you wish to meet Bel before your time, move not out of the circle, no matter what happens."

Then he threw some incense in two

bowls that stood on either side of the altar and quickly took his place beside Star inside the circle. He began to chant slowly. The incense sent up great swirls of smoke obscuring the empty throne.

Over and beyond Abeshu's droning voice there suddenly came a whispering and a whirring noise as though hundreds of invisible wings were sloughing the air. Star became numb with the fear of the understandable, which at some time in life is known by everyone.

Then Abeshu spoke the word of power.

That instant the whispering and the sighing of the air stopped and a force swept through the room that was devastating. Abeshu crouched low, his forehead touching the ground.

Star, who had been standing erect, felt herself catapulted to the floor, and for a minute she lost her senses. When she came to she looked up. The clouds of incense had been blown away.

The chair behind the altar was no longer empty.

In it sat a being so radiant, so majestic that Star could not look long at that luminous beauty. The goddess—for such a being could be naught else—regarded her steadily, and it seemed to Star as though that gaze stripped her soul bare, and there was nothing of her or her secret thoughts that the radiant being did not know.

Then the goddess spoke in a slow, measured voice that had no feeling in it but was like the clear, crystal chiming of a bell.

"Well, daughter, you have dared summon me from my own halls. Tell me why, for surely your need is great that you need a goddess to succor you."

Though she was trembling, Star answered, "Mother Ishtar, you whom I worship, know well why I have sent for you."

"Perchance. Yet, put your question, daughter."

"Many suitors come for me, and I would have none of them, I, who am your servant. Must I wed one of them, O mother? I, your daughter, pray to you for your own gift—love."

"Are you willing to pay the price, daughter—knowing only that there is a price, not what it may be?"

"Yes," Star barely whispered the word, yet the being on the throne heard, and for the first time smiled.

"All women who love, pay, daughter. Fear not, for though it may take centuries and many lives, yet in the end I tell you

love triumphs over all—even me, from whom it comes. Well, you have sent for me and I will answer your question and give you a gift. To the question, must you wed one of the many suitors, I answer—no. You shall marry him whom your heart treasures, for the gift I give you is the gift of love, not only for a little moment, but for eternity. Remember, daughter, when you pay the price that you pay not for a little hour, but for forever."

The being lifted her hand and held it toward Star. Her lips curvel once more, and then she turned to Abeshu.

"Though you have asked nothing for yourself, Abeshu, I will answer your unspoken question. Things shall be as you wish them, though not quite yet. Now trouble me no more with prayers, Abeshu."

"I give thanks," Abeshu muttered. "I hear and I obey."

Suddenly a strange, unearthly music swelled through the chamber, so sweet, so high-pitched that it was almost unbearable. Star held her hands against her ears and shut her eyes. When she opened them the presence on the throne was gone. The room was still.

"Are you happy now, O Star?" Abeshu asked dryly.

Star stumbled to her feet. "Yes, for the goddess promised me love for all time, Abeshu."

"Love at a price!"

"I care not."

"Well, remember that saying when you come to pay, princess," the man said. "Now we must go back. Your woman, Rima, will be full of fear."

Later, back in the tiled room again, Star gave her hand to Abeshu.

"I thank you, for you have served me well. Name your own reward."

For a few minutes Abeshu stood silently. Then he spoke: "I crave only to be your counselor. It comes upon me, perhaps because the wisdom of the goddess has touched me, that you may need my counsel."

"So be it. Now I remember that the goddess promised you something, too. What, Abeshu?"

"She said things would be as I wished them in time, princess—a matter of policy in the temple. There is one who wishes me ill. I rejoice that I shall triumph, even if it is not quite yet—"

"I think you do not tell me all, Abeshu. But let it rest. I will be glad of your counsel, and in the meantime, for your pains, take this—" Star drew a ruby that was big and red as a cherry from her

finger and threw it to Abeshu. She did not see the look he flashed at her as he picked up the stone from the floor where it had fallen. She was thinking of the goddess' promise. But I saw, and I knew that Abeshu was an enemy to the Princess of Babylon, and that—even while he thanked her for her munificence—he hated her with all the force of his crafty soul.

On her way back to the palace, Star lay in her silken litter, propped up by scented pillows, with Rima, her woman, at her side. The litter itself, on poles of gold, was carried by twenty men. It was large and commodious, and, as it moved along, people everywhere made way for the daughter of the king and bent down before her in loving reverence. It was easy to read the adoration for their princess in the peoples' eyes.

The guardians of the litter, who rode before and behind it on snow-white horses, guided the men toward the hanging gardens, for they knew the princess loved the beauty of that which was held to be one of the wonders of the world.

The hanging gardens of Babylon! In truth, they were so lovely that they beggared description, for in them was gathered all the color the rainbow of the garden possessed, and every known plant and flower flourished in tropical splendor.

Star drank in the scented air as she was carried along. Once when Rima started to speak she lifted her hand. "No, Rima, this is too beautiful to mar with words." And they proceeded in silence.

Suddenly that silence was broken by a cry. "Help, help!" A young boy ran toward them. He stopped short when he saw the white horses of the guard and the litter of the princess. The chief of the guard motioned him aside. He moved as he was bidden. When the litter came near to him Star noticed his lip trembled and there was blood on his cheek and on the single garment that he wore.

She clapped her hands three times, the signal that told her bearers to halt.

"Bring the boy to me," she commanded.

"Not here!" Rima protested.

"Here—put down the steps."

Again she was obeyed. The captain of the guard, an elderly man who had been about Star since her babyhood, stepped forward.

"Let me question him, princess, if such be your will."

"Nay, bring him here, Gittair."

The boy was too frightened to speak

at first, but Star calmed him and asked what was wrong.

Finally he answered, "It is my friend—he who saved my mother's life when the horse would have trampled her—and now a mob besets him, for they say he hurt the horse of Prince Khian when he pulled it away from my mother. The prince's men are trying to kill him for revenge. Prince Khian has many horses; why should he care for one that was only a wild beast?"

"Why, indeed, and why should the Prince of Egypt take judgment in his own hands? Rescue that man for me, Gittair." Star was imperious.

Gittair sent half of his guard with the boy, back to the place from which they could now hear sounds of conflict emanating. After a little those sounds died away and the guard returned. There were fewer of them, and in their midst walked the boy, with a stranger beside him. The stranger was tall and slim, yet with strong muscles that showed plainly under his bronzed skin. The white garment that he wore had been torn badly, so that the upper part of his body was bare. His face was finely chiseled and framed by silky black hair which made his great eyes seem all the darker. He had a straight nose and a mouth that made Star's heart leap as she looked at it.

"Truly Ishtar keeps her promise well," she said to Rima. "In this moment love has been born in my heart."

The woman moaned. "Pray Bel it be not some slave."

"Nay, give thanks to my mother Ishtar," Star whispered, and for a moment it seemed to her there was a strain of the sweet music she had heard in the sanctuary.

Now the stranger was near to her, and Star leaned forward. Their eyes met, and Star knew with that first glance that she had found her fate.

"Down—" growled Gittair.

The boy's head touched the grass, but the stranger stayed erect.

"I am grateful for the help, great one—my need was sore."

"How are you called?"

"Belzar."

"Are you of Babylon?"

"Nay, I am Egyptian by birth, lady, but my mother was from Babylon."

"What is your trade?"

"I sell my sword, lady, to those who pay well. I came here with Prince Khian, but, as I liked not his service, left it these

two days past. Which, perhaps, is why the prince's guards, who once called me comrade, were angrier than need be."

Gittair stirred restlessly at Star's long questioning, and Rima kept whispering they should hurry to the palace.

Star ignored them. "Since you are not engaged, will you sell your sword to me?" she asked.

A flame leaped from Belzar's eyes to hers. "Gladly, lady, and as thanks for my rescue—a piece of news of great import to you and Babylon."

"Then follow us. Gittair, see that he is made one of my own personal guards. I will talk with you again, Belzar—soon; for I would hear your news, and more of Egypt and that Prince Khian whom you served."

Star smiled at Belzar and gave the signal for the litter to start on its way. In her heart there was a singing music as beautiful as Ishtar's own. For close beside the litter walked Belzar.

She leaned toward him. His head was on a level with hers as she lay propped up by pillows.

"Tell me your news now, Belzar."

"These slaves?" He gestured toward the bearers.

"Are deaf muties. Speak on. Rima, turn your head away."

"Lady, your beauty is as that of the stars that shine in the heavens."

Star laughed. "So am I called—Star of Light."

"Whose rays have found my heart."

"Men have been killed for saying less than that. You are bold, Belzar."

"Your eyes gave me courage."

"You are quick at reading. Well, I bid you speak your heart."

"I love you."

Star caught his words to her heart and treasured them there for eternity.

Eternity! I, Alice Strand, looked long at Belzar's face, for something told me I should some day find its counterpart in my own life.

Star answered simply. "And I love you. Know, Belzar, that this very day the Goddess Ishtar promised I should find love and be my beloved's."

As their eyes caressed, Belzar said, "I give thanks, yet I would that Isis had spoken."

"Perhaps your goddess is the same as mine, Belzar, only in Egypt Ishtar takes a different name."

"You have uttered what may be a great truth. But, lady, how can we claim the promise of the goddess?"

A shadow clouded Star's face. "I know not yet, but I am sure Ishtar will find the way." At that moment she remembered Ishtar had talked of a price. But she thrust the thought from her at the sound of Belzar's voice.

"Listen, lady, to the news I spoke of. Khian plans to abduct you—tomorrow night. Your guards are bribed, except Gittair. Khian knew better than to approach him. Khian plans to take you to his camp. Once he has made you his he knows the king of kings will see you wed—and Egypt is safe from Babylon. So Khian surely wins against the other suitors."

"My father shall hear of this." Star's foot tapped angrily. "We will go to him at once. See, we are nearing the palace. Tell me quickly, Belzar, what is your rank?"

"I should be great in Egypt, lady, if the old strain still held Egypt's throne. But under the reign of the Shepherds we have come to naught."

"Yet your blood is good?"

"Ay, lady, but my State is not enough for Babylon's heir—"

"The goddess promised—yet she spoke of a price." Star held her breath now she had said the words.

"So that I hold you in my arms, I'd give my life—"

"And so would I," Star answered. It seemed to her the music of Ishtar swelled loudly for a moment, then it died away and she heard it no more.

An hour later Star, Gittair and Belzar stood before the king of kings. Mir-bel, ruler of Babylon, was a frail man, and even the light linen headdress of royalty crowned with gold seemed too heavy for him to bear. Yet he sat majestically and held the ivory, gold-tipped scepter as one born to command.

"The charge you make is a grave one," he said to Belzar, "if it be true."

"Tomorrow night will prove its truth, O mighty one."

"If so, I grant lands and rank to you who will have saved the princess. Now listen. Let no suspicion of this leak abroad. Gittair, change not your men, but for every man of the princess' guard, three of mine shall stay hidden. We will catch them at their own game. Belzar must remain unseen for the present lest Khian suspect he has told. Can you see to that, Gittair?"

Star spoke. "I can, father, if it please you. My woman, Rima, could keep him in the secret room of my tower.

"Nay, child, Gittair will see to him."

"Can I not help guard the princess when they come?" Belzar spoke boldly.

Mir-bel smiled. "Youth ever wants to fight. Put him with my guards that night, Gittair. Now go."

Star kissed her father's hand dutifully. Mir-bel meant little to her. She saw him rarely—mostly on state occasions—and regarded him with awe rather than affection.

"May the king live forever!" cried Gittair, and Belzar echoed him.

The two men backed out of the room, but Star walked with her head held high.

The next night she prepared for bed as usual. She spent a long time in her heated marble bath, enjoying the fragrance of the scented waters. She sat quiet, while Rima brushed her hair, and, even when the woman had gone, lay quite still, as though she were asleep, without a sign of the excitement she felt. She knew that all around the room, hidden behind the hangings, were her father's men, and that Belzar was with them, watching her lying on her great silk embroidered bed. And her heart beat faster as she sent her thoughts to him.

The last rays of the moon had vanished. It was the hour between night and morning. Suddenly she heard a stealthy step, then another and another.

A great mass of soft material enveloped her. It was wrapped swiftly about her, stifling any cry she might make, and she was lifted up in strong arms. This had been well planned. Even now they might get away with her in the dark—they were so silent. Suppose her father's guards had not heard, or Belzar—

Just then a shout told her the guard was alert. She could even see through the material a sudden blaze of light and hear the sound of fighting.

The man who was carrying her did not put her down, but went on running as fast as he could until she could hardly hear the sound of the fray. She knew the man must be making for the entrance to the garden, and she was terribly afraid. She tried to scream, but the material stifled her. Then she heard Belzar's voice, sharply commanding: "Put down the princess or I'll have your life!"

The man who held her answered, "She is my shield. I am taking her with me to Khian, traitor. To stop me you must kill her." Star knew the man was

holding her and backing toward the door.

"Not so—my arm still has skill!" Star heard a hissing noise, a groan, felt the arms about her relax their hold. At the same moment other arms caught her, and a hand began untangling the material from her. There was the sound of a body falling.

When she was freed from the material she looked up into Belzar's eyes. She was in his arms. "My love," she whispered.

The sound of people coming along the corridor from her room forced their lips apart. Belzar put Star's feet on the ground, releasing his hold.

Nearby lay a large, swarthy man with a dagger through his eye.

"I threw upward to pierce his brain. An old trick," Belzar said.

"Yet one that saved my life. See, Gittair," Star called to the captain of the guard who approached, "the miracle Belzar has done!" Quickly she told the tale, and then, while they were still exclaiming in wonder, slipped back into her chamber, where she found Rima and her other women waiting.

Late the next day Abeshu asked for an audience. Star received him on the terrace outside the portion of the palace that was her own. She sat in a golden chair under a canopy that was almost as large as a room. Beyond her stretched gardens of exquisite beauty.

Abeshu bowed and Star extended her hand to him. He touched his forehead with it.

"I bear a message."

"Speak, Abeshu," Star motioned him to a chair. He made himself comfortable.

"Much has happened since we met."

"Is that your message?"

"Ney. The message is from your father, Mir-bel, king of kings, who bids you to a feast tomorrow night. He tells me to whisper in your ear to make yourself beautiful, for it is your betrothal feast."

"So soon? O Ishtar, help me now!"

"Have faith, daughter."

"Who will the king give me to? Answer me, Abeshu, who know all things. Tell me, too, how I can have faith when the hour is so close and there is no way I can see."

"Because the goddess told you you should have your love, princess, and I, Abeshu, have come to help you as the goddess planned."

"I heard naught of any plans, and

yet I would be glad of help." Star's voice softened.

"Then listen." Abeshu leaned nearer. "Mir-bel has decided to keep Babylon to itself. In order to avoid dissension after his death, he will wed you to Ditmah, his brother's son, heir after you."

"Now I would rather die."

"So you said to me before, and I am sure you mean it—still more, now that the goddess has granted part of your prayers."

"You know?"

"When a princess kisses it means she loves. Hate me not, Star, because I was hidden in the little passageway and saw. Well, for that deed—I mean rescuing you, not the kiss, though in truth that was mighty"—he hurried on to avoid Star's anger—"as I said, for rescuing you, Belzar has been made a noble of Babylon and given command under Gittair of your guard. So you are one step bettered."

"One step is little with a whole flight to climb."

"But a beginning. At least Belzar is not unknown. He has a place at court. Listen, princess; at the feast, wine flows freely. Even the great king of kings, to whom all the world bows, is mellowed by the juice of the grape, and once he has promised anything, and *the one to whom he gives that promise touches his sceptre, that decree cannot be altered or changed.*"

"I never thought of that. Of a truth, Abeshu, you are wise." Star's lips curved as she thought of Belzar.

She didn't see the crafty eyes of the man narrow, or notice the smile of triumph on his face. But they were there, and I, Alice, saw them and was afraid. I didn't want ill to come to this ancient self of mine. She was too lovely, too sweet, too wrapped up in her love to cope with the evil in Abeshu's mind. For just as surely as I saw the great ruby glistening on Star's fingers, I saw the evil of that man. Still, I could not warn Star.

Perhaps, though, she felt some of my misgivings. At any rate, she turned to him.

"Why do you help me, Abeshu, against my father, whose counselor you are?"

"The king of kings grows old. I must look to myself, and you have promised me a place in your counsel, Star of Light." He bowed.

"You will not find me ungrateful. Tell he how best I may manage."

"That you must leave to your woman's wits, but remember they are sharpened by love. Mine shall be the task to see that the cup, the great gold cup of the king of kings, is well filled."

"Suppose the scheme fails—what then?"

"Well, Ditmah is not young, and I have secrets. But the scheme will not fail. Once you have the king's word and touch the scepter, not even Bel himself can keep you and your love apart. The king of kings suspects nothing, and, as a further help, I will tell him I sounded you out and you were well pleased with his choice."

"What reward can I give you?"

"You have already promised—"

"That is in the future. I mean for the present."

The man thought for a moment. "Another ruby, princess, for a pair can be used for earrings."

Star detached a ruby, the largest from her necklace.

"A poor present, but an earnest that there shall be more. And I will not ask you who will wear them."

Abeshu too the ruby and knelt before Star. "Have I your leave to go?"

Star inclined her head. She was so busy with her own thoughts that she did not see him slip silently away.

The great hall of the palace where Mir-bel held his feast was full of people when Star, attended by Rima and Gittair, took her place at the banquet table.

One third of the hall, which was roofless, had awnings stretched over its length. Below the awning was the table of the king of kings set high upon a dais. Below were more tables graded in height for the less important guests, and many level with the floor for the guards, eunuchs and followers of the visitors.

Belzar, with his newly granted rank of noble of Babylon, was at a table near enough so Star could see his face.

Star had never looked more beautiful. Her hair was outspread and sprinkled with gems. She wore a diamond-studded gown and looked like the Star for which she was called. She sat at the right of Mir-bel, Temu at his left. Ditmah was at one end of the table, Khian at the other, for the Egyptian prince had claimed he knew nothing of the plot and had acquiesced in the killing of his men, saying they deserved death for plotting behind his back. There were others at Mir-bel's table, ladies of his household

and the court, more of Star's suitors, some whose rank was not so great at the lesser tables. Abeshu sat three removed from the king and was keeping his promise by seeing the king of king's cup was well filled and often. As the feast went on, Mir-bel's color heightened and Star knew that he was growing mellow as Abeshu had predicted.

Finally Abeshu looked at Star. "The time is coming," he signalled with his eyes. He rose, taking a bottle from the chamberlain with the tall pointed hat who stood beside him, walked to the king of king's and prostrated himself to the ground. Mir-bel stretched out his scepter and Abeshu rose.

"May the king live forever!" he exclaimed, as was customary. "Here I have an old and wondrous wine which in the temple is used only for great celebrations. I have brought it for you to drink tonight, for this hour henceforth will be great in Babylon."

He spoke to Mir-bel, but he smiled at Star.

The king of kings lifted his gold cup, so richly carved it looked like a chalice. He tilted it and poured its contents on the table.

"A libation for the gods!" he cried. "Now give me your wine, but taste it first, Abeshu, so we know its safe."

Abeshu broke the slender neck of the bottle, holding it high, let a little trickle down his throat and swallowed. Then, at a nod from Mir-bel, he filled the gold cup.

The king of kings lifted it toward Star and drained its contents. As he set the cup down he said. "Truly, Abeshu, that wine is potent. Already I feel fire running through my veins."

Abeshu slipped back of Mir-bel's chair, standing well toward the left, where he could look at Star.

"Fire of the gods!" he exclaimed.

Mir-bel rose. "I have asked you all here tonight because it is time that my heir, Star of Light, Princess of Babylon, is wed—for her own sake and that of Babylon. So now I choose her husband."

Abeshu nodded to Star.

Star knew it was the moment for her to speak, and her heart throbbed so loudly it was like a hammer in a throat.

"Mother Ishtar, help me now," she prayed, and she heard a soft strain of the music she had heard in the sanctuary and rose with newfound courage.

"O my father, I, Star, beg a boon of you."

Mir-bel turned and smiled benignly. "Speak on, daughter."

"I beg that I myself shall choose my mate." Very regal she looked as she stood there; the iridescent glow of hundreds of diamonds shining from her robes and hair, combined with her beauty, made her seem like an illustrious being clothed in light. There was a murmur of admiration throughout the hall.

Mir-bel looked at her proudly. "You have been brought up to be a queen, my daughter, and you have learned your lesson well. You *are* a queen and could not choose other than wisely. I give you leave to choose your husband here and now." He stretched out the scepter, and Star touched it.

Then a new wisdom came to her. She would make things doubly safe.

"One further boon. That when I have chosen, I and my husband may live in the small palace by Ishtar's temple, for I would not be parted from my father—or my people—"

Star looked at Ditmah, who stirred in his seat. He was a handsome man, elderly, but still showing race and breeding in his face.

Mir-bel nodded. "As you have spoken so shall it be." Once more the scepter was extended and touched. Then Mir-bel said firmly, "And now, Star of Light, name your mate."

He sat down upon his golden chair. There was silence in the mammoth hall. Every eye was turned upon Star. But out of that whole multitude, Star saw only Belzar's face, white under its tan, staring at her.

She smiled at him, and then her voice rang out clear and sweet as the chiming of a silver bell.

"Arise, Belzar, high-born Egyptian, noble of Babylon, chosen husband of Star of Light!"

The surprise the people felt shivered through the palace. Mir-bel looked at Star as though what he had heard was incredible, while his hand clenched angrily. In Abeshu's face was admiration and elation, in Ditmah's relief, while Khian, Temu, and the other suitors were surprised as well as disappointed.

Only in Belzar's face was joy intensified a hundredfold as he stumbled to his feet and made his way to Star.

The people were still spellbound with amazement as he leaped across the table to Star's side. He clasped her hand in his,

and happiness rippled over them like little waves from a sea of bliss.

At the sight of them standing together, rage engulfed Mir-bel, anger such as he had never felt before. He turned to Abeshu.

"Untie me this knot, counselor," he commanded.

Abeshu leaned over and whispered in the ear of the king of kings.

Star, in her youth and happiness, turned to Mir-bel. "You have spoken, O my father. Your decree is unalterable, and I have touched your scepter. As you gave me permission to do, I have chosen my husband, and you promised we might dwell in the same palace by Ishtar's temple." Very sure of herself, now she had gained her love, was Star, and her face was more radiant than her jewels.

"As I decreed, so it shall be," Mir-bel's voice rang through the hall, "though you have chosen more like a slave girl than a queen. You shall wed Belzar, high-born of Egypt," he sneered, "who for a short while has been a noble of Babylon. You shall be wed, princess, as befits your rank. Your lover shall be raised high for the week the ceremony and rejoicings last. Then you two shall go to live in the Palace close by Ishtar's temple. Fear not, I shall keep my word. Nay, I even strengthen it, for this is my degree, which none can alter. You and your husband *shall* live in the palace. There shall be a room made ready for you in its walls and, living, you shall be placed there and the walls closed so that you may dwell there eternally."

Now through the room there was a wave of horror at this sentence of living death. Some even were moved to protest, but Mir-bel waved his scepter and they quieted.

"Ditmah henceforth is heir of Babylon. Let my words be written down," he said; then, leaning heavily on Abeshu's arm, he left the hall, old before his time.

Star saw nothing that went on, not Ditmah's pride nor the courtiers fawning on him, not the sympathy nor compassion in other more kindly eyes, for she looked only at Belzar, who smiled.

"Your goddess said that there would be a price, and truly it is not too much to pay—for a week of happiness.

"I had thought that we were safe, that I had secured our future. But Abeshu betrayed me, and now I have only brought you a horrible death."

"Not horrible, for we will be together,

and did not your goddess promise that once the price was paid—"

"—that our love was safe forever. Yes, Belzar, not only for this life, but all lives to come."

"Then I count the price a small one." There was nobility in his voice, in his look.

Abeshu's voice broke in upon them, sounding loudly in the great place from which all the people had fled.

"The king if kings sent me to guide Belzar to quarters befitting the affianced of the princess. He said your marriage will take place tomorrow. He is anxious for the week of festival to begin, so I can the sooner escort you to your new home."

"Traitor! I wonder you dare address me." Star spoke royally.

"Nay, princess, call me not traitor. You were traitor to Babylon when you plotted against her. Princesses are but pawns in a royal game, and you stepped out of your place. You went against your race, your breeding and your country. You put self first, who should have abased it."

Now Star hung her head, for there was truth in Abeshu's words.

"Still," she said, "you might have saved us from such a terrible death, for I know well you showed my father where to walk."

"Yes, Star. But I would not have had you done your duty. Ditmah's wife is my sister's child, and he had no desire to wed you and set you over her whom he truly loves. Nor did he desire to lose Babylon. Yet I would have worked for you had you been firm, but I was glad when you were willful—"

Star laughed, and her laughter sounded more like a sob.

Belzar put his arms around her. "Peace, Star. This man but does the work of the gods."

"Thank you"—Abeshu shot Belzar a kindly glance—"and for your comfort, these." He drew two gold locket from his belt. "They contain a tasteless powder. If you swallow it when you enter the chamber in the wall, by the time the last stone is in place you will be with the gods painlessly and quickly."

"My gratitude is yours." Belzar took the locket.

"And mine." Star reached out for the other. "I had dreaded the death. Now there is naught to fear—only a week of happiness together." She leaned close to Belzar. "Thank you, Abeshu."

"Now follow me," he said, and Star and Belzar walked behind him.

The gorgeous, near-barbaric Eastern ceremony, a full week of celebration, passed as swiftly as a memory. A week in which two must force what joy their lives should hold. For on the morning of the eighth day Abeshu came to Star's quarters, which she now shared with Belzar.

Star was wearing the dress of transparent stuff and had never looked more beautiful.

"The time has come," Abeshu said. "your litter waits."

Star put her hand in Belzar's. "We are ready."

An hour later they stood together in a small niche hollowed out of the seven-foot thickness of the wall.

"Take the powder now," Abeshu whispered, "while I stand here so those nobles who come to watch see not."

Star and Belzar opened their lockets and swallowed the powder.

"May Bel receive your souls," Abeshu murmured.

"May Ishtar guard our love," Star said, and detached the ruby necklace, giving it to Abeshu.

Then Abeshu stood aside so all could see it was truly Star of Light and Belzar in the narrow place.

Abeshu gave an order, and as he and the priests started a chant, men began putting the great stones in place, entombing the lovers.

Belzar held Star closely. "But a little and eternity is ours, and even more happiness, my beloved."

Already the powder was making Star drowsy. She clung to her husband. "I love you, Belzar, I love you."

"And I you, who gave up so much for me."

"It was nothing . . . to . . . the joy —" A celestial music came to them, swelling in their ears, and out of it a voice spoke, calm and beautiful.

It was the voice of Ishtar. "Fear not, my children. At this moment you come to me. The love I promised is truly yours for all time to come."

The last stone was pushed into place. But Star and Belzar were already wrapped in light.

And the spirit of Alice Strand was back in her own body in her room in Aunt Amabel's house, with her hand on the patchwork quilt. Once again it had opened the doors of the past, but this time it had given me also a promise for the future.

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